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# The rise of digital authoritarianism: Is the Internet to be blamed?

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## **Abstract:**

The last decade has been battered by growing concerns about the rise of digital authoritarianism. The ever-increasing number of human rights breaches and the global decline in democracy is alarming. The rationale behind this study is to find out who is to be deemed liable. While a legal framework that accommodate the digital infrastructure is yet to be established, this research looks at the shifts in structure, practices and behavior between the internet and authoritarianism through data analysis, comparative-based and theory-based approaches. The findings suggest that as long as there is concentration of all powers by the state, it is unlikely that the internet would aid democratic consolidation, unless there is a strong resistance to shake the public institutions, nurture individual agency and call for collective collaboration. To achieve such a level of resilience, the research recommends to lift the lid on the shifts between technology and policy in order to grasp the reality of digital authoritarianism.

## **Acknowledgement:**

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## List of abbreviations

HRC	Human Rights Council
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil Political Rights
ICT	Information Communication Technologies
ISP	Internet Service Providers
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
WSIS	World Summit on the Information Society

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

In an attempt to ease the reading process, to disseminate knowledge inclusively and to ensure the terms used are understood properly within the context of this research. Here is a non-exhaustive list of definitions deemed necessary.

**Anonymity:** lacking any distinguishing feature which can enable the identification of its originator<sup>1</sup>.

**Cyber space:** a virtual space where computer-mediated communication takes place but which may not be spatially located<sup>2</sup>.

**Digital Cooperation:** describing ways of working together to address the societal, ethical, legal and economic impacts of digital technologies in order to maximize benefits to society and minimize harms<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmad Kamal (2005) The law of cyber-space, Geneva: United Nations Institute for Training and Research.

<sup>2</sup> Andreas Zimmermann (2014) 'International law and 'cyber space'', ESIL Reflections , 3(1), pp. 1-6.

<sup>3</sup> UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation (2019) The age of digital interdependence , New York: United Nations.

**Digitalization:** within the scope of this research, digitalization refers to the way in which many domains of social life are restructured around internet-enabled technologies<sup>4</sup>.

**Hacking:** a generic term for all forms of unauthorized access to a computer or a computer network<sup>5</sup>.

**Internet Governance:** the development and application by governments, the private sector, and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programs that shape the evolution and use of the Internet<sup>6</sup>. The concept of internet governance remains open and prone to different connotations, such as: digital policy, digital governance, Internet policy, and cyber governance<sup>7</sup>.

**Internet Service Provider (ISP):** an organization that provides Internet access and related services to users<sup>8</sup>.

**Traditional media:** referring to the main forms of media which are TV, newspapers and radio that are state-run.

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<sup>4</sup> For further explanations, see Jason Bloomberg (2018) Digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation: confuse them at your peril, Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonbloomberg/2018/04/29/digitization-digitalization-and-digital-transformation-confuse-them-at-your-peril/#25de42372f2c> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) (2005) Report of the working group on internet governance, Geneva: WSIS.

<sup>7</sup> Digital Watch Observatory (2018) What is internet governance, Available at: <https://dig.watch/what-is-internet-governance-digital-policy> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Ahmad Kamal (2005) The law of cyber-space, Geneva: United Nations Institute for Training and Research.



## **Introduction:**

As never before the world is so dependent on the internet. The global rise of information and communication technologies has infused the public sphere with unlimited amount of discourses and information otherwise unavailable. Internet and communication technologies led to the creation of a new public sphere that transcends geographical confines and highlights issues of concern within a decentralized virtual environment. Scholars have been optimistic about the Internet's potential to create the “purest” form of democracy where everyone’s voice would be heard and where information would be freely accessed and shared. And yet what is happening today has somewhat inverted to a complex puzzle contesting the contribution of the internet to a new kind of public sphere and thus to democracy. As with online uprisings, a collective promise has embedded in the idea of the internet as a virtual public sphere that could foster transparency, achieve accountability and shape a better government-citizen relationship. However, authoritarian leaders have predicted these aspirations, and implemented policies to undermine the power of online civic engagement to pursue democratic change. From providing avenues for human rights activism and platforms for expression and political participation. Internet, with the unprecedented rise of digital authoritarianism, started serving the interests of anti democratic forces through coercion, censorship and surveillance. Therefore, this dissertation aims to look at the edges of the legal setting and the internet. While the international community has urged about the safeguarding of human rights online, the upsurge of digital authoritarianism recalls for the importance to investigate the extent to which the normative framework can be applicable within the cyberspace. This dissertation also acknowledges the need to be mindful about policy and practice alongside laws when undertaking such research. Therefore, throughout the chapters we will unpack the years of democracy decline the world has observed ever since the internet took control of our lives, and we will unveil what has been occurring beneath our screens. Last but not least, this dissertation strives to come up with effective policy recommendations, based on the findings, and with respect to the OECD governance model as well as the digital cooperation.

## **Main Research Question:**

Is the internet to be blamed for the rise of digital authoritarianism?

## **Sub-Research Questions**

- How is the Internet seen in the international context ?; To what extent can the internet be considered as a public sphere ?
- How do authoritarian regimes exploit the status quo to retool their online-control strategy ?; What are their tactics to undermine democracy ?
- What are the conditions under which the internet would aid the full enjoyment of the freedom of expression and the right to privacy, thereby aiding democratic consolidation?
- How does online behavior affect the political status quo ?
- Is there any hope for government-citizen relationship to flourish under censorship ?; Can e-democracy contribute to this process?

## **RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE:**

As of 2019, an alarming number of repressive laws have been implemented to hamper the free practice of the right to freedom of expression on the internet. The increasing practices of online surveillance and control is appalling. Impingement of the political and civil rights is a threat to human rights, democracy and international peace, and it is more urging when it comes to the internet. Not only the latter has become an integral part of everyone's lives but it has also influenced the future and dominated the future of work. Nevertheless, the fact that many are still at the margins of the digital revolution is deeply disturbing, whereas those who are "fully digitalized" are often acting by ignorance without understanding what is hidden from view of them. Therefore, time is now to endorse our rights to an open, free internet as frequent users, time is now to hold state accountable, and ultimately time is now to unveil who does what in order for us to

advocate purposely. Last but not least, this research does look at the Arab uprisings as a specific case during which internet mobilization was praised globally, however, with hindsight, the failure of the transition to democracy in most of the Arab spring countries has raised questions as regard to the real potential of the internet. Is it to be blamed ? That is what the findings will reveal. In the meanwhile, this dissertation recalls the period when everyone seemed optimistic about the best way of communication humanity has ever experienced. Yet, today it is being questioned for the dangerous harms it might have caused to social and political life. Was the first judgment too soon ? Or it is the involvement of unknown parties ? Everyone should be deeply concerned about the answers because democracy may not resist to redoing the same mistakes.

## **Methodology:**

This research seeks to investigate the questions mentioned herein-above using this following methodology: It firstly sets the legal background through a literature review of soft laws and legally-binding resolutions. Overall, the chapters commonly rely on data analysis based on previous findings and/or surveys, measurement and observation of relevant empirical studies. Whereas for some sub-sections, there is a preference for comparative approaches to better scrutinize the shift in patterns between the authoritarianism and democracy. While for other sections, the research adopts either the Lessig's theory on internet regulation to conceptualize the relationship between the internet and democracy, or the cascade theory to explore the impact online citizen behavior has on the rise of digital authoritarianism. The final recommendations are based on the analysis of the OECD Going Digital framework in which the author has participated.

**Analysis:**

**The rise of digital authoritarianism: is the Internet to be blamed?**

## CHAPTER 1:

Throughout the history of human-kind, there has always been a vital need for creating shared knowledge-spheres<sup>9</sup> under a monopolized authority. From the oral communication that was principally localized by the individuals<sup>10</sup> who were able to speak and hear, to the printing invention that partially democratized knowledge, yet, gave the power to the elites, and ultimately to the digital age that changed the flow of information and reshaped the scope of its ownership. People from all walks of life started getting online, whereas knowledge decentralized and broadly shared across time and space. This shift took off the power that used to lie in the hands of the well-informed and conferred it upon those who had access to the internet, thereby establishing new contested bounds within a so-called virtual environment. Everything was happening at an unforeseen speed, pushing states to lookout for effective ways to maintain the order they wish to achieve, and although the legal framework of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was human-centered, it could not accommodate the burst of the technological challenges. Moreover, the cyberspace is often seen as a non-legal domain<sup>11</sup>. This perception is based on a number of assumptions. The first one is that cyberspace is different from real spaces: its border-less and ubiquitous aspects differentiate it from the physically limited spaces that are abiding by laws and over which state can exercise its jurisdiction<sup>12</sup>. The second assumption is that cyberspace shall supposedly remain an open, decentralized and participatory space not hindered by any external force<sup>13</sup>. Thus far, the view that cyberspace is subject to law and indeed to

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<sup>9</sup> Hilary Wilder and Sharmila Pixy Ferris (2006) 'Communication technology and the evolution of knowledge', University of Michigan Library Digital Collections, 9(2), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/jjep/3336451.0009.201?view=text;rgn=main> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Tsagourias, Russel Burchan (2015) Research handbook on international law and cyberspace, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar. pp. 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> David R Johnson and David G Post (1998) in Nicholas Tsagourias, Russel Burchan (2015) Research handbook on international law and cyberspace, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar. pp. 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Tim Wu and Jack Goldsmith (2006) in Nicholas Tsagourias, Russel Burchan (2015) Research handbook on international law and cyberspace, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar. pp. 13-14.

international law is no longer in dispute<sup>14</sup>, however, its applicability remains subject to recurring debates between academics, policy makers and development practitioners, not to mention the civil society and digital activists. Therefore, this chapter shall discuss the legal background espousing the internet revolution while highlighting the rights pertaining specifically to this research and bringing forward the paradoxes and challenges constraining them.

## 1.1. Freedom of Opinion and Expression:

Human history has witnessed the inherent desire to express one's opinion and to exercise one's freedom without any interference, however, it has also witnessed the longstanding opposition against its great potential to change the course of things. Certainly, one would have at least once heard of scientists, writers, artists etc who have been convicted for holding an unpopular opinion seen as a threat from the state and the general public alike. Still, to date most of atrocities that plague the world involve control over the freedom of expression and opinion. Therefore, the longstanding support of international human rights law to the freedom of opinion and expression justifies itself, especially that it surged in the aftermath of the second World War and the Holocaust<sup>15</sup> : alongside giving to the principle of non-discrimination an utmost importance in safeguarding human dignity and preventing wars, international bodies have built a normative framework in support to the freedom of opinion and expression.

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:

*“ Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers ”*

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Tsagourias, Russel Burchan (2015) Research handbook on international law and cyberspace, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar. pp. 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> Article 19 (2008) Experts meeting on the links between Article 19 and Article 20 of the ICCPR, Available at: <https://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/conferences/iccpr-links-between-articles-19-and-20.pdf> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

*Indeed, one has the right to hold an opinion and freely express it, one has the right to receive information and knowledge through different platforms, where applicable. Yet, one has to bear in mind that this right is not absolute, it comes with restrictions that influence the effectiveness and the functionality of the whole legal setting. These latter are laid down in the Article 19(3) of the ICCPR:*

*“ The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; (b) For the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals ”*

*This provision posed the fine lines between freedom of expression and sovereign control, and was sufficient to stifle expression and encourage for censorship<sup>16</sup>. Further, the Article 20 of the ICCPR specifically required states to restrict forms of expression<sup>17</sup> :*

*“ (1) Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law. (2) Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.”*

*It shall be noted that both the provisions presented above used some terms that are, to an extent, vague and unclear – such as discrimination, hostility – , allowing states to enshrine in their domestic laws an interpretation that would tailor the flow of their interest and maintain the status quo. It shall also be noticed that such articles have been written in the time when traditional media was used and seen as the only medium between government and citizens. Fast forward to today, numerous soft laws have been*

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<sup>16</sup> Michael O’Flaherty (2012) 'Freedom of expression: Article 19 of the international covenant on civil and political rights and the human rights committee’s general comment No 34', *Human Rights Law Review*, 12(4), pp. 627-654 [Online]. Available at: <http://www.corteidh.or.cr/tablas/r29946.pdf> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid



*adopted in the post-internet era that have discursively constructed the trail of policy-making, media and public discourses.*

### ***World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)***

The post 2001 September 11<sup>th</sup> era was a turning point in the whole Information Society field. Not only states began to express an unprecedented interest to the cyberspace and to Cybersecurity in particular but also the individual felt, to a large extent, threatened by the debates over the governance of the internet – or in contrary the lack of engagement thereof<sup>18</sup>. In January 2002, the UN General Assembly officially recognized the urgent need to harness the potential of technology as well as the pivotal role of the United Nations system in promoting information and communication technologies and services through partnerships with all relevant stakeholders<sup>19</sup>. This provision has established the ground for a new model of internet governance that has been introduced and endorsed during the “World Summit on the Information Society”. It took first place in Geneva where an action-oriented plan has been developed, clearly stating a strong willingness to take concrete steps as regard to the integrity of the numerous interests at stake<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, the second phase of the Summit in Tunis has witnessed the attendance of heads of state/government and ministers as well as high-level representatives from international organizations, private sector, and civil society who have given their full political support to the Tunis Commitment and endorsed the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society<sup>21</sup>, thereby redefining a new model of governance of the internet based on processes that are inclusive and driven by consensus<sup>22</sup>, to encompass both technical and public policies issues and strive to work through a multi-stakeholders approach<sup>23</sup>. This agenda puts the

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<sup>18</sup> Daniel W. Drezner (2004) 'The global governance of the internet: bringing the state back in', *Political Science Quarterly*, 119(3), pp. 447-498 [Online]. Available at: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/20202392?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20202392?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

<sup>19</sup> United Nations General Assembly (2002) 'Resolution A/RES/56/183', International Telecommunications Union, (), pp. 1-3.

<sup>20</sup> UNESCO (2019) World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/building-knowledge-societies/wsis> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Internet Society (2018) Internet governance, Available at: <https://www.internetsociety.org/issues/internet-governance/> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

<sup>23</sup> International Telecommunications Union (2005) 'Tunis agenda for the information society', World Summit on the Information Society, 5(1), pp. 1-20.

freedom of expression and universal access to information as cornerstones of inclusive knowledge societies<sup>24</sup>. Any infringement thereof could hinder the pledge for an open and free internet.

## **Maputo Declaration**

*The 2008 UNESCO conference on “Freedom of Expression, Access to Information and Empowerment of People” in Maputo, Mozambique recalled the importance of freedom of expression in democratization, thereby emphasizing the role it plays in fostering transparency and openness in public debates as well as in decision-making. Besides, UNESCO highlighted the inextricable linkages between freedom of expression and the cultural identity for that a transgression of the freedom to expression is a threat to diversity. Therefore, this declaration is calling upon member states to work for a pluralistic, inclusive communication technologies, and to refer to the guidelines of the document if they are to raise awareness on and promote its provisions within the United Nations system and among-st strategic partners<sup>25</sup>.*

## **Brisbane Declaration**

During the 2010 UNESCO World Press Freedom Day conference, the participants recalled both the Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the two phases of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). In unanimity, the participants have recognized the right to know or freedom of information as an integral part of the freedom of expression, and acknowledged the challenge of the digital and knowledge divide in bringing the information communication technologies (ICTs)

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<sup>24</sup> UNESCO (2019) Freedom of Information, Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/freedom-of-expression/freedom-of-information/> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

<sup>25</sup> UNESCO (2019) Maputo declaration , Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/events/prizes-and-celebrations/celebrations/international-days/world-press-freedom-day/previous-celebrations/worldpressfreedomday2009001/maputo-declaration/> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

agenda forward. Finally, they have urged the international community to foster cultural understanding and to promote media literacy at all levels of the society<sup>26</sup>.

## General Comment 34

In its 102<sup>nd</sup> session, the United Nations Human Rights Committee adopted the Comment 34 to Article 19: Freedom of opinion and expression , suggesting that freedom of opinion and of expression are “indispensable conditions for the full development of the person”<sup>27</sup>, and stressing that a lack thereof would put democracy, even the power of democratization at risk. Furthermore, General Comment 34 gives a thorough understanding of the UDHR article 19 and article 20 , as it expressly states all kinds of communications – regardless of the frontiers<sup>28</sup> – subject to their provisions. The scope of this remark goes beyond the forms of expression to the means of their dissemination which specifically include all forms of audio-visual as well as electronic and internet-based modes of expression<sup>29</sup>, hence, alluding to the birth of a new generation of rights, inter alia digital rights. Generally speaking, this comment provides guidance to states on how to cope with their obligations in practice: in this regard it stirs the restriction conversation up and presents a full picture of their applicability especially in national security issues and political contexts. Transparency and accountability are the watchwords of this document in respect with the promotion and the protection of human rights. A broader analysis of the provisions will follow in the next chapters.

## 1.2. Freedom of Expression on the Internet

In a landmark resolution adopted by consensus, the United Nations Human Rights Council affirms that “the same rights that people have offline must also be protected

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<sup>26</sup> UNESCO (2019) Brisbane declaration , Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/events/prizes-and-celebrations/celebrations/international-days/world-press-freedom-day/previous-celebrations/2010/brisbane-declaration/> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Lim, Young Joon; Sexton, Sarah E (2012) 'Internet as a human right: A practical legal framework to address the unique nature of the medium and to promote development', Washington Journal of Law , 12(4), pp. 296-318 [Online]. Available at: <http://digital.law.washington.edu/dspace-law/handle/1773.1/11114> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Council (2011) ‘General Comment No. 34, Article 19: Freedoms of Opinion and Expression’, CCPR/C/GC/34

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

online, in particular freedom of expression” (HRC res 20/8, June 2012)<sup>30</sup>. Deeply concerned about the increasing number of human rights violations online – freedom of expression in particular – documented by the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the HRC has considered follow-up resolutions<sup>31</sup> on “the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet” where it recalled states to respect their commitments towards safeguarding the rights enshrined in the UDHR online with a strong emphasis on the right to access to information and the freedom of expression.

### 1.3. Right to Privacy:

There are rights that have not been formed on a need-basis but that rather have been assigned to the human being by nature. Since the dawn of time, the need for privacy has been inherent, has persisted throughout societies and resisted to cultural clashes. However, what once made sense to privacy has changed from an era to another, just as the limits that individuals used to pose to the so-called “personal space”, alongside the different things they associate with it (people also in some cases). Therefore, the meaning of privacy depends on the environment as a whole, and often does comply with the religion, national laws and the tradition of the territory where citizens belong – or sometimes even identify themselves to – . The establishment of a normative framework has allowed the right to privacy to take shape as well as to adapt – or at least to try to adapt – to local realities. Nevertheless, the interpretation of this right has always been difficult given the abstract character that revolves around it, and that is why international treaties have recognized it as a universal right that shall be respected, protected and fulfilled, although the scope of such legal protection has yet to be determined<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Article 19 (2016) UNHRC: strong resolution must be adopted on human rights on the Internet, Available at: <https://www.article19.org/resources/unhrc-strong-resolution-must-be-adopted-on-human-rights-on-the-internet/> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

<sup>31</sup> See Human Rights Council (2014) ‘Resolution 26/13’, Human Rights Committee (2016) ‘Resolution 32/L.20’, Human Rights Committee (2018) ‘Resolution 38/L.10

<sup>32</sup> Alexandra Rengel (2015) 'Privacy as an International human right and the right to obscurity in cyberspace', Groningen Journal of International Law, 2(2), pp. 33-54.

“No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.”<sup>33</sup>

As straightforward as possible, the above quote determines the scope of the right to privacy. At first glance, this might sound obsolete, however, the historicity of this article goes back to the post world war II period when privacy was linked to the honor of citizens and their family members. As of now, the term privacy provokes insights on personal data, intellectual property and the right to be forgotten. As a matter of fact, the same provisions were enshrined in the Article 17 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

### **1.3.1. Right to Privacy in the Digital Age**

The concept of privacy in the digital sphere is undoubtedly complex to solve. In this regard, there are many questions arising out: how far could the limits of privacy be achieved in a context, by nature, without boundaries? Is it feasible or even credible to talk about invisible online access, and/or legal restrictions of the right to privacy without infringement of private information? Let alone questions surrounding censorship and surveillance. In order to properly answer some of these scenarios, creating design based privacy solutions<sup>34</sup> is deemed to be necessary. It is particularly in this approach that the United Nations General Assembly adopted in December 2013 the one of its kind resolution 68/167 on the right to privacy in the digital age to express its deepest concern about the negative impact that surveillance and interception of communications may have on human rights<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 12

<sup>34</sup> Alexandra Rengel (2015) 'Privacy as an International human right and the right to obscurity in cyberspace', *Groningen Journal of International Law*, 2(2), pp. 33-54.

<sup>35</sup> OHCHR (2014) The right to privacy in the digital age, Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/DigitalAge/Pages/DigitalAgeIndex.aspx> (Accessed: 25 May 2019).

“[T]he protection and promotion of the right to privacy in the context of domestic and extraterritorial surveillance and/or interception of digital communications and collection of personal data, including on a mass scale<sup>36</sup>”.

Within this perspective, the Human Rights Council appointed – in 2015 – a special rapporteur on the right to privacy to report on alleged violations of the right to privacy including in connection with the challenges arising from new technologies<sup>37</sup>.

### **1.3.2. From the Right to Privacy to Freedom of Opinion and Expression**

Let us focus on the term “correspondence” mentioned in article 17 of the ICCPR; there is no doubt that the interference with the latter engenders an infringement of the freedom of expression. Indeed, a simple and direct answer to a daily-life situation shall uphold this affirmation: Would anyone write the same message if they know that it would be read and "inspected" before reaching their desired destination? To the possible extent, the answer will be negative. Hence, the right to the anonymity is inevitably essential for a free expression, in the truest sense of the word! Also, the use of privacy becomes urgent in cases of abuse and violence. Unfortunately, victims of violence – especially victims of sexual assault – are less open and less encouraged to confide, thus are more likely to struggle to voice their grief. In point of fact, this struggle increases when they know beforehand that they would not be guaranteed a protection from the spread and/or defamation of their most intimate information. Creating a private space for this kind of issue is not to be negotiated, if we are to maintain a reliable witness and consequently, to exercise a free expression without any external pressure. There are various arguments to advance about the implication of privacy in the enjoyment of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and technological development has made it more obvious especially with the involvement of third parties having purely commercial purposes without a mere consideration for the enjoyment of human rights. Freedom of expression

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<sup>36</sup> United Nations General Assembly (2013) 'Resolution 68/167 The right to privacy in the digital age', Third Committee, (), pp. 1-3.

<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Council (2015) 'Resolution 28/16'

and the right to privacy are inextricably associated: De facto, we can not guarantee a free expression if our words are put under a magnifying glass, however, who holds control of this glass is yet to be solved within an internet-enabled infrastructure. And that is exactly what the research aspires to answer through looking into the drastic changes that came along the digital turmoil.

## CHAPTER 2

Frequently, cyberspace is not presented as physically located, however, any computed-mediated communication requires a hardware that must be situated in the outer space within the territory of one state or more<sup>38</sup>. Such irrelevancy creates an ambiguity for the international law with respect to the technical feasibility of which state is in a position to regulate the behavior on the internet and therefore which state is to be liable for any human rights breach occurring within its jurisdiction. Moreover, the review of the developments undergone by both the normative and legal framework at the aftermath of the digital era has raised questions as to the nature of the institutional ground upon which these laws act. Since the internet has no central editorial control, it in principle allows everyone to appear and express themselves publicly<sup>39</sup>. Thereby, creating participatory spaces for discussions and having a huge impact on the course of democracy and what it entails. However, the internet does not permit an exact understanding of the boundaries by which it is limited, nor the jurisdictions to where it belongs. Besides, this particular characteristic has provided more than a pathway to the legitimization of the state, the assertion of authority and the pursue of democracy. Besides, this particular characteristic has enabled blind spots where state has found its pathway to legitimize surveillance, assert authority and undermine the pursue of democracy. Not only, it has also reshaped the concept of an audience, thereby bringing forward new public discourses competing between the online and offline environments. One of the most important advents of the internet that has triggered the interest of many stakeholders is the challenge it has posed to the authority of mass media, as the emergence of digital technologies has by default – given its architecture – assigned it to a new generation of real-time, interactive and decentralized media. It is in this specific framework that this chapter will study, then

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<sup>38</sup> Andreas Zimmermann (2014) 'International law and 'cyber space'', ESIL Reflections , 3(1), pp. 1-6.

<sup>39</sup> Rikke Frank Jorgensen (2013) Framing the net: the internet and human Rights, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.



analyze this phenomenon alongside retrieving the factors which aided the development of an internet-enabled public sphere, which aspects and outcomes will be closely examined.

## 2.1. PUBLIC SPHERE

The term public sphere consists of two words: public and sphere. Its literal definition is obvious and does not require further research, however, its connotation is much deeper than it might seem. The origin of the term is German, as known as, *öffentlichkeit*: denotes “the public” and “publicness”<sup>40</sup>, “the

public” for that it is open to everyone without exception, and “publicness” because it is subject to visibility and public scrutiny. The historicity of the public sphere goes back to the epoch of the modern state where mercantile-type economy was under state control and where public authority only insinuated that of the state<sup>41</sup>. Parallel to this, a literary public sphere was born within the families who developed reading habits. However, with the emergence of a new social class, understood as the bourgeoisie and comprised of civil society, this literary public sphere has turned into a political public sphere critical of the actions of the state, claiming transparency and calling upon rationality that is subject to the best argument rather than the state argument. Furthermore, public opinion significantly evolved at the intellectual places of social life where discourses of public matter have occurred between individuals not pertaining to the state, giving rise to a “private” political sphere whilst the state remained then referring to the public power. Overall, the concept was introduced and coined by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, and has been subjected to significant developments given the complexity of the ways in which public opinions are shaped and influenced. In order to get a thorough understanding of the normative framework that it implies, an analysis of the Habermas model is weighing.

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<sup>40</sup> Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge (1993) *Public sphere and experience toward an analysis of the bourgeois and proletarian public sphere*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press .

<sup>41</sup> Habermas Jürgen (1991) *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, Cambridge: MA: MIT Press, as referenced in ESAD Strasbourg (2012) *L’espace public chez Habermas : idéal, dégénéscence, espoir démocratique*, Available at: <https://esadespacespublics.wordpress.com/2012/03/19/6-lespace-public-chez-habermas-ideal-degenescence-espoir-democratique/> (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

## HABERMAS MODEL

By the end of the 18th century the feudal powers of church and nobility diminished paving the way for the rise of the bourgeois society in Europe<sup>42</sup>. Before that time, citizens were merely subsumed to the public, instead they were sustained to the aristocratic authority which dominated the power as a whole. Hence, the word "public" was primarily alluding to the physical appearance of the governor, and public opinion only made sense when it was conform and consistent to that of the ruler. This situation could not withstand the rise of the bourgeoisie as well as their dominance of social life, thereby, spawning a decline of the aristocratic class. At the side of state representation, these events have incrementally contributed to the overthrow of the supreme power held and exercised by an individual. Contrarily, it has been transmitted through the establishment of an institutional system: this political scene and structural societal change laid the foundation for a renewed public opinion where the citizen figures in due and proper form. And it is essentially in this direction that the Habermas model stands out as a normative claim<sup>43</sup>. Not only the latter does display a transformative perception of the public sphere but it also draws the limitations that follow relying on the circumstances of the bourgeois society in the early 19th century<sup>44</sup>. Indeed, Habermas emphasizes the sphere of political character with a vest interest on the state and on the status quo. This distinction foresees on the one hand, state influence on the embodiment of an objective and critical opinion that aids the democratization process, and on the other hand, the implications of women's, and minorities' non-participation in these circles of discussion. With a view to overcoming this constraints, the Habermas model ideally puts the political sphere as a counterpart of the public sphere<sup>45</sup>, whereas he describes the latter as a mediator acting on the dynamics of state-citizen relations to enable citizen-led debates not subject to public

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<sup>42</sup> Chandra Mukerji, Michael Schudson (1991) *Rethinking popular culture : contemporary perspectives in cultural studies*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press. pp.398-404.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Habermas Jurgen (1991) *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, Cambridge: MA: MIT Press.

<sup>45</sup> Chandra Mukerji, Michael Schudson (1991) *Rethinking popular culture : contemporary perspectives in cultural studies*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press. pp.398-404.

authority. Instead, this new public sphere brings closer the governing realm to the needs of the society and attempts to highlight the actions of the state and activities thereof.

### **CRITICISMS:**

Several scholars have criticized Habermas' theory of the public sphere for multiple reasons: some of them have argued the pessimism Habermas expressed with regard to the contemporary changes mass media have undergone and that are not at odds with the idea of participatory democracy he claimed to be central for his ideal model of public sphere, whereas he was supposed to give an alternative to democratic media strategies. For other scholars, Habermas was stuck in his understanding of old and new, which did not enable him to embrace a global vision within a fast paced environment such as the internet. Generally speaking, Habermas has failed to recognize the multiple faces of the public sphere that comprise other ethnicity, minorities and social classes than those pertaining to the Bourgeoisie, nor he succeeded to restructure its model to embed a gendered vision which does certainly aid the democratization process. Given the fact feminists have established their sphere alongside the emergence of the Bourgeois public sphere, and for even Habermas has himself reported women's contribution lacking from his theory since the beginning, and yet he has not done much about it<sup>46</sup>.

### **A STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION**

There are questions arising out of the Habermasian model that can be phrased as follows: What are the features of the public sphere? And are these features valid over time and space? In an effort to answer, one should account for the public/private dichotomy distinction herein-above as the patterns of this structural differentiation are not of typological universality for they are rather rooted in the spatio-temporal specificity of every society<sup>47</sup>. In short, one shall start by analyzing the trajectory of the empirical

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<sup>46</sup> Tina Sikka (2006) 'The public sphere, globalization and technological development', *Academia*, 49(3), pp. 87–93 [Online]. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/2646857/The\\_Public\\_Sphere\\_Globalization\\_and\\_Technological\\_Development](https://www.academia.edu/2646857/The_Public_Sphere_Globalization_and_Technological_Development) (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

<sup>47</sup> T.S. Graham (2009) What's Wife Swap got to do with it? Talking politics in the net-based public sphere. E-thesis [Online]. Available at: <https://dare.uva.nl/search?identifier=452e322e-0244-455e-a397-856bac3f5f7e> (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

relationship between the public and the private<sup>48</sup> so as to gradually unfold the aspects of the public sphere pertaining to each society. Besides, Habermas's approach discerns the conditions required for the public sphere in the early modern period which revolve around the ability to form and voice public discourses, in unrestricted fashion accessible to all citizens, based on the freedom of assembly, freedom of association, the freedom to expression and opinion, and debating over matters of general concern without any economic or political pressure<sup>49</sup>. The conditions also center on the theory of participatory democracy and the capability to transform public opinions into political actions. Finally, it is worth shedding light on the democratic theory and the extent to which it is contingent upon accountability and responsiveness in the decision-making process the public sphere might facilitate or hinder<sup>50</sup>.

## 2.2. THE INTERNET AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The hypotheses on the internet and the public sphere shall be concerned with the representation that one might conceive of the latter. In Habermas, the public sphere is a virtual or imaginary community, which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space<sup>51</sup>. Thus far, the public sphere is founded on social mobilization and the influence it has on democracy through the actions it ignites, hence the determinacy of its physical structure clearly involves the character of democracy and the assumptions resulting thereof. Given the variations in democratic systems and cultures around the world, and given the pace of change—social, political, and technological<sup>52</sup>, the perception one might have of the public sphere would be inexorably tied to different spaces. With the advent of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Habermas Jürgen (1991) *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, Cambridge: MA: MIT Press.

<sup>50</sup> Myra Marx Ferree, William A. Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht (2002) 'Four models of the public sphere in modern democracies', *Theory and Society*, 31(3), pp. 289-324.

<sup>51</sup> Habermas Jürgen (1991) *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, Cambridge: MA: MIT Press.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Dahlgren (2005) 'The internet, public spheres, and political communication: dispersion and deliberation, political communication', *Political Communication*, 22(2), pp. 147-162.

the internet, this former has taken another dimension refracted through the lens of the democratization perspective. And whilst Habermas theory does not address the challenges of globalization permeated by the mass, sociological realism suggests that the study of large scale modern societies is a ground-breaking step in understanding the attributes of their impact<sup>53</sup>. The internet came to the fore at a time when democracy seemed to be falling apart<sup>54</sup>, while coffee houses, public salons were at their peak<sup>55</sup>, representing citizen engagement in everyday life and contributing in one way or another to the establishment of cultural and political standards of public opinion. At the same time, the mass media were leading a critical role between the audience and the established power through providing a public sphere in which the formation and consumption of expression is censored<sup>56</sup>, thereby inevitably influencing and shaping the course of democracy. However, these dynamics were not initiated by an inclusive pluralistic participation, on the contrary, many people and parties were sidelined for political or socioeconomic reasons. Nevertheless, the arrival of the internet has alleviated the technical ambivalence of the traditional media and created ubiquitous interactive media where citizens can contemplate what they learn and rationally decide, for themselves, what is best<sup>57</sup>.

### 2.2.1. INTERNET AS A PUBLIC SPHERE

An analysis of the internet as a public sphere would ideally pull together three key elements: access, political mobilization and the ability to democratize and strengthen the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> Finlayson, G. (2005). Habermas: A very short introduction. NY: Oxford University. Habermas, J. (1989). The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society. Cambridge, MA: MIT.

<sup>56</sup> Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt (2013) The mass media, democracy and the public sphere. LSE Research Online [Online]. Available at: [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48964/1/Amended%20Livingstone\\_Mass\\_media\\_democaracy.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48964/1/Amended%20Livingstone_Mass_media_democaracy.pdf) (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

<sup>57</sup> Laura B Hans (2013) The internet as a public sphere: democracy and communication. E-thesis [Online]. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/36075907/THE\\_INTERNET\\_AS\\_A\\_PUBLIC\\_SPHERE\\_DEMOCRACY\\_AND\\_COMMUNICATION](https://www.academia.edu/36075907/THE_INTERNET_AS_A_PUBLIC_SPHERE_DEMOCRACY_AND_COMMUNICATION) (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

participation of individuals in public and political life<sup>58</sup>. According to Peter Dahlgren, the internet constitutes an extension of the mass media, notably because they make up a large part of its content<sup>59</sup>. Additionally, the internet and its channels kept evolving until they have become the primary medium of mass media<sup>60</sup>. And it is not to be demonstrated that this network of networks has the forceful capacity to establish several media, commercial or social platforms that allow an interactive and multi-modal communication. This latter feature has re-conceptualized the audiences one has ever experienced, as it has permitted one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many interactions and yielded the ground to a large, mixed and/or anonymous public with potential to reach everyone on the globe<sup>61</sup>. However, the first major challenge that can not be disregarded is access to this so-called virtual sphere, although millions of people are connected to the internet, those who are still left behind prove that inequalities persist beyond the means envisaged and also make the development of the internet socially biased<sup>62</sup>. Certainly Habermas has pointed out the marginalization of women and other minorities as regard to their participation in the public sphere model, yet to date, connectivity remains a luxury for a large populace<sup>63</sup>. Therefore, it is discursively constructed that the internet as a public sphere is not publicly approachable. Moreover, the fact of not having a finite space creates an incoherence at the level of the prerequisites of democracy<sup>64</sup>: on the one hand the geographical confines do not exist technically and on the other hand the internet blurs the borders between the

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<sup>58</sup> Rikke Frank Jorgensen (2013) *Framing the net: the internet and human Rights*, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.

<sup>59</sup> Dahlgren, P. (2000) "The Public Sphere and the Net: Structure, Space, and Communication," in Bennett, W. L. and Entman, R. M. (eds) *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 33–55.

<sup>60</sup> Obiageli Pauline Ohiagu (2011) 'The internet: the medium of the mass media', *Kiabara Journal of Humanities*, 16(2), pp. 225-232.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> Dahlgren, P. (2000) "The Public Sphere and the Net: Structure, Space, and Communication," in Bennett, W. L. and Entman, R. M. (eds) *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 33–55.

<sup>63</sup> According to Pew Research Center, The demographic digital divide is real and pervasive: internet access growing worldwide but remains higher in advanced economies, Pew Research Center, 18 February 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/02/22/internet-access-growing-worldwide-but-remains-higher-in-advanced-economies/technology-report-02-04/>

<sup>64</sup> *Democracy and the Internet: Access, Engagement and Deliberation* Roman GERODIMOS, Centre for Public Communication Research, University of Bournemouth

public and private<sup>65</sup> which stirs the debate over the institutional reinforcement of online civic engagement, thereby questioning the ability to democratize in light of political mobilization if applicable<sup>66</sup>. Over and above that, Habermas has stressed the constraints faced by the interaction on the internet under authoritarian regimes and that clearly hinders – sometimes even revoke – the democratization process. He has explicitly stated that: Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication when new groups crystallize around the focal points of the quality press, for example, national newspapers and political magazines<sup>67</sup> (Habermas 2005, 422) And even when it comes to democratic rule, Habermas also reckons that the internet somewhat disperses users between different isolated issues<sup>68</sup>. Besides, he does not exclusively adopt this skepticism: in turn too, Benjamin Barber argues - in a normative context based on his own notion of a "strong democracy" - the attributes that make internet-enabled media play a disadvantageous role. Instead of fostering multiculturalism and promoting integration between communities, Barber contends that their singular trait rather tends towards polarization and segmentation<sup>69</sup>. In sum, he deems their informative side to be confusing sometimes even illegitimate, and that it threatens knowledge authority in the mass media we have come to associate with our norms and standards which obstructs the indispensable base to representative and participatory democracy<sup>70</sup>.

### 2.2.2. CLOSING THOUGHTS

It seems undeniable that there is a long-running controvert in the public sphere theory over the contemporary aspect it takes and the high chances that it is none other than the

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<sup>65</sup> Dahlgren Peter (2000) "The Public Sphere and the Net: Structure, Space, and Communication," in Bennett, W. L. and Entman, R. M. (eds) *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 33–55.

<sup>66</sup> Roman Gerodimos (2006) "Democracy and the internet: access, engagement and deliberation", *Journal of Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics*, 3(6), pp. 26-29.

<sup>67</sup> Rasmussen Terje ( 2014) "Internet and the Political Public Sphere", *Sociology Compass*, 8, pages 1315– 1329.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

<sup>69</sup> Benjamin R. Barber (2004) *Strong democracy*, Berkeley : University of California Press.

<sup>70</sup> Rasmussen Terje ( 2014) "Internet and the Political Public Sphere", *Sociology Compass*, 8, pages 1315– 1329.

internet. Properly speaking, the internet is a powerful enabler of public participation that effectively triggers the creation of unprecedented spaces for political mobilization. Accordingly, if we are to reflect upon what has been presented herein-above, it is crucial to mainstream the capacity of digitization to democratize in our analysis. Else, we will find ourselves striving for a pseudo-public sphere that promotes passive spectatorship rather than genuine political debates<sup>71</sup>. Thus far and owing to what is happening, this last speculation seems accurate, as if we assume that people who are autonomous and deliberately free to express themselves are more likely to find the right information as well as to form opinions on decision-making of public significance<sup>72</sup>; we will clearly discern major handicaps manifesting themselves in censorship, disinformation, propaganda and heavy commercial ends on a huge amount of interfaces if not all of them. Additionally, the lack of a distinction between the private and public spheres on the internet eventually disallows the functionality of the latter as a public sphere<sup>73</sup>. Let alone the problems of inequality and social exclusion that ensue from digital marginalization, and even during a full access the question of communicative behavior remains ubiquitous, because the purpose behind the promulgation of the internet as a public sphere is to facilitate the democratization process and not just establish a friendly and random dialogue network. To closely examine the situation and distinguish the dynamics and the indicators that should be taken into account, we will embrace a comprehensive and holistic approach based on individual and comparative case studies tackling democratic, transitional and non-democratic systems.

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<sup>71</sup> Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt (2013) The mass media, democracy and the public sphere. LSE Research Online [Online]. Available at: [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48964/1/Amended%20\\_Livingstone\\_Mass\\_media\\_democaracy.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48964/1/Amended%20_Livingstone_Mass_media_democaracy.pdf) (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

<sup>72</sup> Laura B Hans (2013) The internet as a public sphere: democracy and communication. E-thesis [Online]. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/36075907/THE\\_INTERNET\\_AS\\_A\\_PUBLIC\\_SPHERE\\_DEMOCRACY\\_AND\\_COMMUNICATION](https://www.academia.edu/36075907/THE_INTERNET_AS_A_PUBLIC_SPHERE_DEMOCRACY_AND_COMMUNICATION) (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid



### 2.3. CASE STUDY: ARAB UPRISING

This is a fact that makes perfect sense: as never before the world is so dependent on the internet. The global rise of information and communication technologies has infused the public sphere with unlimited amount of discourses and information otherwise unavailable. Internet and internet-enabled technologies led to the creation of a new contested public sphere that bridges geographical borders and highlights issues of concern within a decentralized virtual environment. At the beginning of the digital booming, scholars were optimistic about the Internet's potential to create a “purest” form of democracy where everyone’s voice would be heard and where knowledge would be freely accessed and shared. However, no interest was visibly shown for the implications of this phenomenon just as it was the case with the mass media<sup>74</sup>. And that may be among the reasons why what we see now has somewhat inverted to a complex puzzle doubting the contribution of the internet to a new kind of public sphere and thus to the democratization process. As with the Arab uprising and what it has entailed from the regular political mobilization online, through the different paths the protests undergone because of the rapidity of a real-time human-centered unity the world has never come to witness, a collective promise has embedded in the idea of the internet as a virtual public sphere that could foster transparency, achieve accountability and shape a better government-citizen relationship. Yet what happened after deposing dictators who have ruled over generations has turned the tide of social media political activism. The period of transitional democracy during which online and offline advocacy have reached their peak has peculiarly proven the internet to be a double-edged sword: the same technologies and networks that have been used as tools to claim basic human rights and plead for a democratic change have allowed authoritarian power holders to monitor the revolution and detect their enemies<sup>75</sup>. They could predict the moves of their opponents, and started gradually implementing policies to undermine the potential of online citizen engagement to pursue their aspirations. What was striking to notice is the direct impact of

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<sup>74</sup> Merrill Morris, Christine Ogan (1996) 'The Internet as mass medium', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 1(4), pp. .

<sup>75</sup> Peter Pellegrini (2019), As quoted at the opening speech of the OECD Going Digital Project

internet shutdowns and the spread of political misinformation on the willingness of onsite protests as time went by. As one would expect, the recourse to state force and false allegations alongside digital censorship has amplified the consequences. Such efforts and threats have succeeded to demobilize citizens and rather pushed them to seek safe content instead of risky political news and state -related information. All the way from providing avenues for human rights activism and platforms for expression and political participation. Internet, with the unprecedented rise of digital authoritarianism, began serving the interests of antidemocratic forces in the Arab society and promoting their beliefs through digital media, coercion, and hidden manipulation. Besides, a recent Pew Center research survey<sup>76</sup> finds that many people in the “Arab Spring” nations remain relatively disconnected from politics. Moreover, another Pew Research Center report reveals that tuning out from politics and immersing oneself in online entertainment has political consequences for the health of democracy<sup>77</sup>, which can totally explain the outrage the demonstrations took after the majority of the citizens were forced to change their active behavior. Ultimately, this case study is of utmost importance to the content of this chapter and to the thesis in general as it is a living example of the aftermath of digitization in the midst of political instability.

## 2.4. Interim Conclusion:

Throughout this chapter we have explored the concept of the public sphere between the early modern societies and the digital revolution. The normative and comparative analysis maintained has permitted to scrutinize the theory as a whole, rather than seeking to adapt it to the recurrent developments of our society, that never stop and will never cease. As formerly mentioned, the public sphere aims to strengthen the participation of individuals in political and public life by creating spaces for them that are free of any state pressure. These spaces involve non-state actors and differ from those the established

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<sup>76</sup> Pew Research Center (2014) Many in emerging and developing nations disconnected from politics, Available at: <https://esadespacespublics.wordpress.com/2012/03/19/6-lespace-public-chez-habermas-ideal-degenescence-espoir-democratique/> (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

<sup>77</sup> Janna Anderson, Lee Rainie (2018) The future of well being in a tech-saturated world, Washington DC: Pew Research Centre.

power occupies. Ideally, the public sphere embeds freedom of expression and opinion alongside the freedom of assembly, commits to the formation of a political opposition and fosters civic engagement in order to promote participatory democracy or to facilitate the process of democratization in some more specific cases. The public sphere is not limited physically, still, it is anchored in a spatial and institutional dimension, and in that sense, the mass media appear as an omnipresent institution which largely represents the source of information and the mediating voice between the private domain and that of the regime. With the emergence of the internet, all of this notions have been challenged under the speed of an infinite and complex network of networks. From day to day, the internet has proven its global agency that allows more people than ever access to transnational conversations<sup>78</sup> also it provides them with an unrivaled variety of information sources rather than keeping them relying solely on mainstream news media<sup>79</sup>. In short, the internet boasts several merits, however, it has come with a host of potential problems<sup>80</sup> threatening the democratic rule of any country, if there is any, and hindering the transition on the other hand. These flaws concern everyone, as they predict a future at stake in the face of the risks posed by digitization: according to digital rights activist, inclusion should matter most for there is no better than marginalized communities who are likely to witness technology being used against them<sup>81</sup>. In a much more organizational perspective, the World Bank invites countries to primarily integrate a digital agenda into their economic strategy, that strives, among other things, to enhance the analogical foundations of the digital revolution, and to ultimately invest in literacy

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<sup>78</sup> Guidry, Kennedy, Zald (2000) and Piper, Uhlin (2004), in Jaredm Wright (2017) The digital public sphere, Available at: <https://jaredmwr.wordpress.com/2017/09/25/the-digital-public-sphere/> (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

<sup>79</sup> Smith, Bellier, and Altick (2011), in Jaredm Wright (2017) The digital public sphere, Available at: <https://jaredmwr.wordpress.com/2017/09/25/the-digital-public-sphere/> (Accessed: 10 June 2019)

<sup>80</sup> Laura Silver, Courtney Johnson (2018) 'Internet connectivity seen as having positive impact on life in Sub-Saharan Africa', Pew Research Center, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/10/09/internet-connectivity-seen-as-having-positive-impact-on-life-in-sub-saharan-africa/> (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

<sup>81</sup> Amie Stepanovich (2017) 'Why inclusion matters ? ', Access Now Blog, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.accessnow.org/why-inclusion-matters/> (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

and critical thinking to unleash the human capital<sup>82</sup>. It is likely that the challenges of the internet as a public sphere go beyond any expectation, not only do they necessitate a legal framework complying with international human rights law, but they also require a structural reinforcement that should be promulgated by each jurisdiction in order to establish a responsive, transparent and accountable virtual system that knows and meets the needs of real life. Action-oriented and evidence-based research is required in this regard, which is why the next chapter will specifically focus on the tactics adopted and envisaged to restrain any willingness to nurture and sustain a vigorous democratic public life<sup>83</sup>. The findings thereof would serve as a base for further policy recommendations and development road-maps.

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<sup>82</sup> World Bank group (2017) Bridging the Digital Divide and Maximizing Digital Dividends for All, Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2017/12/04/bridging-the-digital-divide-and-maximizing-digital-dividends-for-all> (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

<sup>83</sup> Myra Marx Ferree, William A. Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht (2002) 'Four models of the public sphere in modern democracies', *Theory and Society*, 31(3), pp. 289-324.

## CHAPTER 3

The establishment of a normative framework for the protection of human rights has costed many lives and required several steps to achieve the current universal protection mechanism. Thus far, the exemplary jurisdiction has yet to exist despite the reforms and efforts made at the local, regional or global level. Strictly speaking, to expect better progress in the same context within a virtual environment will be pure madness! Not only have new technologies changed everyone's way of life, but they have also had a huge impact on the institutions governing social and political life. There are no two ways about it: a lot of damage have been sacrificed to realize how completely overwhelmed our societies are by the digital revolution that was rather meant to bring common sense. And to be more substantive though, it is always difficult to admit that no reflections have been elaborated as to whether our communities have the potential to host such a change, given the fact that the first assumptions revolving around digitization have been of an abundant optimism, history shall say. The world is undergoing persistent inequalities, and the advent of the internet has contributed to their documentation and to even the amplification of their impact through the creation of new avenues for a worldwide proliferation. This is no where it ends, the geopolitical power relations have hindered the process of democratization, thereby shrinking the public sphere domain and infringing on the citizens' capacity to create exclusive spaces for political mobilization free from state influence. These power relations have also been reinforced by the emergence of big data and artificial intelligence, thus inevitably making it difficult to solve whilst generating research gaps on the long term. Hence, a glimpse of what the micro-level is like up close would allow to define the actors and to understand the indicators involved without leaving rooms for theories. Obviously, this assumes a huge data investment that may otherwise infringe on the right to privacy and demands a steady deployment of convoluted methods, however, a case study as such would enable the partial implementation of responsive and sustainable policies. At high stakes, development

practitioners shall agree! That is why the examination of the tools used by authoritarian regimes would permit to counter the double-edged effect whilst building an impact-assessment mechanism comprising monitoring and evaluation. Primarily based on the most recent findings and on Habermas's account of the public sphere, all of the above is going to be further discussed by: firstly assuming the internet endorses authoritarianism in order to project the results on a comparative case study, to secondly provide an even-sharper focus on authoritarian regimes, to then finally draw the closing verdict upon the synthesis of the previous parts. As of the unanswered questions, they will form the basis for the fourth and final part of this dissertation attempting to fill the missing spots in this domain that are likely to present a combination of the research, policy and practice rather than an examination of the legal aspect on itself, as a mean to achieve a holistic approach.

### **3.1. AUTHORITARIANISM**

Authoritarianism is nothing new, yet its repercussions have grown as never before with the ascension of the digital era. Lifting the lid on digital authoritarianism rhymes with the promotion of a civic engagement based on consciousness and active citizenry rather than a partial or even complete ignorance we have come to witness in the public sphere of today. In a comparative approach, democracy is generally used to refer to the rights and responsibilities of citizens. The will of the people, as expressed through representation, consent and participation, plays a central role in legitimating democracy<sup>84</sup>. Therefore, if we are to work towards an internet that aid the democratic consolidation, we will certainly need to reveal the different patterns through which authoritarianism constrain political participation. And this is what we are going to address in the first part by drawing upon the findings of leading organizations in the matter, also, we will project the verdict on a concrete case study – Arab Spring – , to ultimately finish with an analysis of the civil society as one of the most contested public spheres.

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<sup>84</sup> Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt (2013) The mass media, democracy and the public sphere . LSE Research Online [Online]. Available at: [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48964/1/Amended%20Livingstone\\_Mass\\_media\\_democracy.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48964/1/Amended%20Livingstone_Mass_media_democracy.pdf) (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

### 3.1.1. DECADE OF DECLINE

The 2016 report on political rights and civil liberties published by Freedom House<sup>85</sup> has coined the “Decade of Decline” which alludes to the period from 2006 to 2016, during which democracy underwent a real upheaval<sup>86</sup>. Indeed, the findings of the report show that the indicators of global democracy measured during these ten years have experienced successive step-backs. According to Freedom House, this decade has hit upon the longest democratic crisis in 40 years of their analysis<sup>87</sup>, and has been marked by the rise of the so-called “net decline” that has affected more than a hundred of countries, particularly those under authoritarian regimes and those who have shown a strong inclination towards authoritarianism. Besides, this research has highlighted the commitment of certain democratic states to a new category of democracy described as "illiberal" for that it fails to establish a pluralistic political system and gradually expands the limitations on the freedom of the press<sup>88</sup>. Freedom House suggests that this trend is rather linked to the fact that authoritarianism has become more repressive, yet, was able to survive without recourse to democracy.

### 3.1.2. ARAB SPRING OUTLOOK

As of today, the decade of decline is still present, to say the least. One should get a glimpse of how does authoritarianism work, before digging into the tools adopted by the authoritarian countries that succeeded to undermine democracy at a time when the will of the people was supposed to overthrow their tyrannical rule. In short, authoritarianism is a governing-governed relationship that rests on the permanent use of power<sup>89</sup>, through the disregard for human rights, notably for the freedom of expression and opinion, and the freedom of association. Additionally, authoritarianism rests on the concentration of

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<sup>85</sup> Freedom House (2016) *Freedom in the world 2016*, Washington DC : Freedom House

<sup>86</sup> Arch Puddington (2017) 'Introduction: Modern Authoritarians: Origins, Anatomy, Outlook ', in Freedom House (ed.) *Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians*. Washington DC : Freedom House, pp. 5-10.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> Ibid

<sup>89</sup> Abdelatif Kerzabi (2017) 'La fin de l'autoritarisme dans le monde Arabe', Archives ouvertes, (hal-01522144), pp. 2-5 [Online]. Available at: <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01522144/document> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

political power on all aspects of social life, persecutes the opposition and uses elections to legitimize the regime in the eyes of the international community. In the case of the Arab Uprising which will be detailed herein-after, authoritarianism in this countries primarily invests in the creation and the anchoring of a mass religious authority solely linked to the power and the allies of the power, and that nobody shall discuss – at least publicly<sup>90</sup>. This domination is immersed in all spheres pertaining to the state and is revived by the behavior of "hogra" (the perception of injustice)<sup>91</sup> in other words, the action of hogra insinuates the abuse of power that deprives citizens of their inherent human dignity, which clearly explains why the Arab Spring was referred to as the revolution of dignity<sup>92</sup>. Consequently, the strategy of authoritarianism in this region fuels violence, growing distrust (or sometimes political trust in case of manipulation) and is likely to push the most affected to get radicalized, thereby giving more sense and reason to the regime to spread its control under the pretext of national security, and when supported by western powers, Arab authoritarianism reinforces despotism and repression<sup>93</sup>.

### 3.1.3. INTERNET vs AUTHORITARIANISM

Many researchers attempt to examine the impact internet has on authoritarianism whereas others directly question the extent to which the internet is to blame for the rise of authoritarianism<sup>94</sup>. As we might expect, the verdict is unclear, however, the analysis of

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid

<sup>91</sup> The concept is of an Algerian origin, but very well rooted in the Maghreb in general. The “Hogra” was one of the main causes of the 1988 revolt in Algeria. As a concept, Hogra is absent in literature, but it is worth investigation as a theoretical framework, particularly to explain different fields of study of youth and the state in Africa, as stated in Aya Chebbi (n.d.) 'Youth radicalisation and distrust', Open Government Partnership, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/trust/youth-radicalisation-and-distrust/> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

<sup>92</sup> Javier Collado Ruano (2015) 'Interview with Aya Chebbi, African Youth Movement Founder', Global education magazine, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.gloaleducationmagazine.com/interview-aya-chebbi-african-youth-movement-founder/> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

<sup>93</sup> Abdelatif Kerzabi (2017) 'La fin de l'autoritarisme dans le monde Arabe', Archives ouvertes, (hal-01522144), pp. 2-5 [Online]. Available at: <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01522144/document> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

<sup>94</sup> Juan Ortiz Freuler (2018) 'Is the internet to blame for the rise of authoritarianism?', Open democracy, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/digitaliberties/is-the-internet-to-blame-for-the-rise-of-authoritarianism/> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).



certain events is of utmost importance to strive to grasp the nature of the inextricable linkage between the internet and authoritarianism. As a first step, we will closely look at the case of Arab authoritarianism mentioned above to raise triggering points. The rejection of the value of liberal democracies is the most widespread alibi on the Arab societies<sup>95</sup>, except it is the absence of freedom especially that of expression in all its forms that shapes the dominant cultural narrative. And that is why the Arab regimes could not admit nor tolerate the surge of media promoted by new technologies: not only the media landscape has turned the streets, houses and meeting places upside down and has brought a new promise for cultural and intellectual emancipation, but also where state institutions and political parties have failed, the internet has given birth to a possible mobilization that emanates from the individual and not from ruling parties serving their own interests. The Arab citizen could finally get to experience then claim some of the rights omitted by force, albeit virtual but of major significance, on one side, the prevalence of interactive media has supported the rise of a collective and critical thinking of the state and its deliberate use of violence, and on the other side, social media groups have allowed people spaces to discuss social injustices as well as their contributions to the miserable quality of life they were leading<sup>96</sup>. And in the image of the past European revolutions that have been nourished by the printing habits in general and the theories of the Enlightenment philosophers, it appears that – likewise – the Arab Uprising has flourished on the fertile ground of the new digital culture<sup>97</sup>. Did this culture become in the grip of the authoritarian governor? This is what we will find out by focusing on the transformation civil spaces witnessed in digital time.

### 3.1.4. CIVIL SPACES

During this last decade, the restrictions of the civil liberties were the subject of recurrent international appeal for strict investigations principally after the creation of the mandate

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<sup>95</sup> Abdelatif Kerzabi (2017) 'La fin de l'autoritarisme dans le monde Arabe', Archives ouvertes, (hal-01522144), pp. 2-5 [Online]. Available at: <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01522144/document> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid

<sup>97</sup> As referenced in Yves Gonzalez-Quijano (2016) 'Les révoltes arabes au temps de la transition numérique. Mythes et réalités', Archives ouvertes, (hal-01283823), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01283823/document> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association<sup>98</sup> who has observed a real threat to freedoms enabling participation in democratic processes<sup>99</sup>. Moreover, the report of the forty-first session of the Human Rights Council under the agenda item 3 "Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development" reaffirms that international law protects the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association regardless of the means through which they are exercised and notably taking into account current and future technological advances as well<sup>100</sup>. The Special Rapporteur particularly pointed out that the conduct of the state must be in compliance with existing human rights norms and principles and that tech companies should also make sure to follow this normative universal framework in order to improve their governance and their regulation of digital technologies<sup>101</sup>. This observation has exclusively targeted, among other things, the proliferation of new spaces enabled by the advent of digital technology and has pushed the debate further over the opportunities and the risks this poses for democracy, peace and development<sup>102</sup>: thus far, the compromise does not seem evident and crucially requires the multiplication of transnational efforts. In conjunction with this, the Freedom House Report of 2019 has expressed concerns over the global average score having slumped for the 13th consecutive year in view of the hostile forces that continue to target institutions protecting political rights and civil liberties<sup>103</sup>. For Freedom House, as long as the digital decline continue to persist, the damage accrued over the past 13 years will not soon be undone<sup>104</sup>. The global alliance of civil society organizations and activists aka CIVICUS has also dedicated the 2018 report on the state of civil society

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<sup>98</sup> OHCHR (2010) 'Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association', OHCHR, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/AssemblyAssociation/Pages/SRFreedomAssemblyAssociationIndex.aspx> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

<sup>99</sup> Tactical Tech (2019) *Shrinking Civil Space: A Digital Perspective*, Berlin: Tactical Tech's funders.

<sup>100</sup> Human Rights Council (2018) *Rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, A/HRC/41/41*; Human Rights Council.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid

<sup>102</sup> Ibid

<sup>103</sup> Freedom House (2016) *Freedom in the world 2016*, Washington DC : Freedom House

<sup>104</sup> Ibid

whose alarming findings do not differ from those of the other reports cited<sup>105</sup>, on top of that, CIVICUS Monitor – a year-long initiative tracking the online space for civil society around the world – has reminded academia of the main trends in online surveillance and manipulation<sup>106</sup> that need to be taken seriously for that they betray the promise of social media as a platform for free expression.

In terms of the digital, shrinking civil space is factual<sup>107</sup>. CSOs and their activities are permanently persecuted hence negatively impacting the guarantee of freedom of expression and the right to privacy for all the political opposition<sup>108</sup>. In addition, their internet behavior is often watched and can therefore lead to legal prosecutions given the recent repressive laws implemented by a number of authoritarian states seeking to use technology as a pillar of restriction<sup>109</sup>. The last drop in this perspective – studied by Tactical Tech – is the overall reliance on tech companies' regulation which also curtail civil spaces<sup>110</sup> for that it is not transparent, and for that it does not have accurate standards that reveal tech companies' understanding of what they consider to be a threat to national security, an incitement for hatred and disinformation inter alias.

## 3.2. INTERNET REGULATION

It is no longer to prove, the previous analysis reports dashed hopes as to the promotion of democracy through digital communication technologies that, instead, appear at the heart of a global turn to authoritarianism<sup>111</sup>. A closer look at the design of the internet will reveal a deeply-rooted influence having a massive impact on the boundaries of state power, an influence negotiated by private companies holding the primary infrastructures

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<sup>105</sup> CIVICUS (2018) *State of the civil society report 2018*, New York: CIVICUS.

<sup>106</sup> CIVICUS (2018) *Democracy for all: Beyond a crisis of imagination*, New York: CIVICUS.

<sup>107</sup> Tactical Tech (2019) *Shrinking Civil Space: A Digital Perspective*, Berlin: Tactical Tech's funders.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

<sup>109</sup> Ibid

<sup>110</sup> Ibid

<sup>111</sup> Murakami Wood, 2017 retrieved from Marlies Glasius, Marcus Michaelsen (2018) 'Illiberal and authoritarian practices in the digital sphere', *International Journal of Communication*, 12(3795–3813), pp. 1-10 [Online]. Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/8899> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

as well as the technical expertise<sup>112</sup>. Actually, the concern goes beyond who rules the digital sphere and rather spreads to the compromises state seek to reach in order to assert authority and implement sovereignty. Those reached agreements create blind research spots in the sense that practitioners and advocates need to grasp what is in need of protection, from what and from whom, to fight good fights<sup>113</sup>. Therefore, before looking into state-run attempts to control the digital sphere, a presentation of the normative established framework is mandatory to understand the paradoxical shifts the whole study might involve.

### 3.2.1. LESSIG THESIS

The cyber-libertarian age<sup>114</sup>, it is a time when regulation of the cyberspace was not conceivable, because in the eyes of everyone, cyberspace has been designed to resist any sort of state sovereignty. Far from this, it has long been seen as a space facilitating the exercise of individual freedoms. Nevertheless, those who stayed behind these assumptions were overtaken by the inevitable transition that cyberspace has experienced when state eagerly cooperated with the giants of digital technologies to disseminate and legitimize their ideas and tools for control<sup>115</sup>. Whilst regulation permits power over interactions in the internet, traditional approaches are troublesome for that they fail to answer the question of “regulability” – as to whether governments are even able to regulate the online space<sup>116</sup>. Thereupon, Lessig's theory inductively intervenes to provide a groundbreaking view of the main forces building the regulatory environment.

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<sup>112</sup> Marlies Glasius, Marcus Michaelsen (2018) 'Illiberal and authoritarian practices in the digital sphere', *International Journal of Communication*, 12(3795–3813), pp. 1-10 [Online]. Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/8899> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

<sup>113</sup> Ibid

<sup>114</sup> Lawrence Lessig (1998) 'The laws of cyberspace', *Cyber Harvard*, (), pp. 3-4 [Online]. Available at: [https://cyber.harvard.edu/works/lessig/laws\\_cyberspace.pdf](https://cyber.harvard.edu/works/lessig/laws_cyberspace.pdf) (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

<sup>115</sup> Marlies Glasius, Marcus Michaelsen (2018) 'Illiberal and authoritarian practices in the digital sphere', *International Journal of Communication*, 12(3795–3813), pp. 1-10 [Online]. Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/8899> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

<sup>116</sup> Implementing Sovereignty on the Internet Benjamin Bercowitz, Ryan Madsen, Fred Wulff, Stanford University, <https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs201/projects/2007-08/implementing-sovereignty/page1.html>

## **1- LAW**

Laws constraining behavior in real spaces have been transferred to constrain behavior in the online space. However, law enforcement imposes a huge challenge to monitor cases physically impracticable. And although Lessig's first argument is legislation-centered, over the course of the theory<sup>117</sup>, this argument will change to fit into the broader lens of the other indicators presented below.

## **2- SOCIAL NORMS**

Just as in real life, social norms do not go unnoticed in the virtual world. Not only norms impose indisputable rules but they also assist regulation by providing new pathways for its reinforcement. In short, they display the profile of the governor by inducing individuals to censor – even punish – themselves without resorting to the law. One thing is certain, no one is immune to social exclusion when it comes to breaking cultural ancestral ideologies within a network of networks.

## **3- MARKET**

Regulation is a numbers' game<sup>118</sup>. By bringing the market to the fore, Lessig alludes to the various constraints on access<sup>119</sup>: prices, marginal connectivity and the fluctuations they might endure depending on the political trends.

## **4- ARCHITECTURE**

In a world that is not made of locked doors, it is obvious to sleep through the regulation that surrounds it, for it becomes fluid and distracted. On the other hand, architecture is made of codes that we do not choose whereas other people control and modify according to their interest. A simple change of algorithms has the capacity to disrupt behavior and interactions over the long term, comprising the market, norms and laws.

In light of the Lessig's account of regulation, there are other challenges his thought shall be concerned with: Internet gatekeepers mediate between the theory and practice, which

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid

<sup>118</sup> Ibid

<sup>119</sup> The Laws of Cyberspace Draft 3, Lawrence Lessig, Lessig 1998: This essay was presented at the Taiwan Net '98 conference, in Taipei, March, 1998, Page 4

poses an ambiguity to governments as to the means that are likely to enforce the envisaged laws – for instance. Besides, the issue of sovereignty is indeed alarming in the sense that it does not help to recognize the jurisdiction in question and therefore does not aid the accountability process. Last but not least, a considerable number of actions and movements in cyberspace have no real analog, thereby impeding the application of the most basic human rights principles<sup>120</sup>.

To deepen our analysis, a study of the audiences that state seek to influence – with a particular emphasis on authoritarian regimes – will allow afterwards the development of responsive policies to the digital threat.

### 3.2.2. TARGETED AUDIENCES

The empirical relationship between audience and regulation is not tacit knowledge as it might sound. It is intimately intertwined with the Habermas theory on the public sphere: Admittedly, the promotion of a mass participatory democracy requires an institutional reinforcement of the means of communication for the development of public spaces in which political stance takes place, however, the ambivalence of this thought rests on the extent to which the mass media elaborates or even traces the political participation of citizens. Besides, the good or the bad functioning of this medium indicates the degree of democracy attained<sup>121</sup>. Looking at the social structure of the public to understand the foundations of a process of technocratic rationality<sup>122</sup>, as such, within a community setting would provide an overview of the possibilities of fostering dialogue and debate in an ultimate interactive era. To embedding evidence, the targeted audiences would be scrutinized in authoritarianism, then compared to a specific democratic ruling.

In the foreground is the elite. It is ancestrally attached to the maintenance of the status quo: a mere destabilization could actually engender the collapse of the authoritarian

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<sup>120</sup> Benjamin Bercowitz, Ryan Madsen, Fred Wulff (2007) 'Implementing sovereignty on the Internet', Stanford Education, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs201/projects/2007-08/implementing-sovereignty/page1.html> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

<sup>121</sup> Peter Dahlgren, Marc Abélès, Daniel Dayan, Éric Maigret (1994) 'L'espace public et les médias: une nouvelle ère ?', CAIRN Info, 1(13-14), pp. 243, ISBN 227105138X

<sup>122</sup> Ibid

regime<sup>123</sup>. As a result, the coalitions formed by the elite hold a considerable number of supposedly state-controlled media, and through multiple channels, dominate public opinion and display power. In a second rank appear the political opposition and the civil society; the beating heart of the public sphere of Habermas for that they are the manifestation of the notion of participatory democracy. Yet, in the eyes of authoritarianism, there is no way that a political alternative exists<sup>124</sup>, and therefore, every measure should be taken to shrink their spaces and outlaw their opinions. As with the emergence of internet users, the traditional audience state used to handle has experienced a major split, raising another issue for authoritarianism regimes that goes beyond discrediting public opinion to prevent the surge of social mobilizations from a world decidedly without frontiers. In general, the mass arouses the interest of all the actors of the society, but power-holders are more fascinated by guiding this populace<sup>125</sup>. Democracies are concerned too. The 2017 Audit of UK Democracy<sup>126</sup> has raised worries about the salience of the UK's media system for the quality of its democracy<sup>127</sup>. In this respect, elections are no longer enough, diversity and pluralism are required to design healthy public spaces. As far as the UK's media landscape has been a long-standing liberal and democratic icon, it could not resist the widespread of online public discourses that have particularly challenged the traditional hegemony of the UK's state-funded broadcasters and the national press<sup>128</sup>. The audit suggests an array of solutions, in conjunction with the previously mentioned Lessig's framework, to sustain democracy through media that would drive value to the outputs of this analysis. First and foremost, it sheds light on the UK's market distorted by the presence of monopolies who presumptuously share the content part between them and against any state direction.

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<sup>123</sup> Robert Orttung and Christopher Walker (2014) 'Autocratic regimes need the media to survive', Gulf news, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/autocratic-regimes-need-the-media-to-survive-1.1277032> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid

<sup>125</sup> Ibid

<sup>126</sup> Democratic Audit UK (2017) 'Audit 2017: How well does the UK's media system sustain democratic politics?', Democratic Audit, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.democraticaudit.com/2017/08/04/audit-2017-how-well-does-the-uks-media-system-sustain-democratic-politics/> (Accessed: 26 June 2019).

<sup>127</sup> Ibid

<sup>128</sup> Ibid

Therefore there are grounds to believe that an open market with access to others competitors would definitely promote pluralism and free press as well. Moreover, in a more architectural aspect still relevant to the market, state control of bandwidth hinders the realization of impartial and professional regulation, typically during the elections. At this point, diversifying the funding sources would ensure a desirable minimum of neutral coverage, however, access should be guaranteed at low-cost – ideally free of charge – and with high level of transparency, to the extent possible, to give citizens the right to know and comment on accurate and predominant information. It goes without saying, social norms intervene in forms of stereotypes, hate speech and false information that ordinary citizens often find it hard to recognize. The advent of emerging technologies and artificial intelligence has underpinned a data-driven biases that represent an alarming breach to the living-together and the cohesion of our societies. In this case, it is judicious to rethink media education, the training of journalists and to involve stakeholders with different backgrounds and political affiliations at an operational decision-making level. According to Lessig's theory, and before resorting to legal reforms, one should take into account the dynamics that have permeated the other indicators. Indeed, the legal domain is delicate, even when it comes to a liberal democracy, and therefore striving for a balance where the freedom of expression and opinion and the right to access the right information cannot be jeopardized whatsoever shall be most appropriate for the current moment. Finally, this case study has demonstrated the inextricable linkage between the nature of the targeted audience and the degree of democracy or authoritarianism. In both cases, the implementation of the proposed regulation system does not answer these questions as to whether the granting of full access spells democratization, whereas if a long-term censorship engenders self-censorship.

### **3.3. AUTHORITARIAN APPROACHES**

For the past several decades, liberal democracies have espoused the benefits of a global internet that is free, open, inter-operable, secure, and resilient. These are what we term



the liberal-democratic policy community's five internet principles<sup>129</sup> for the protection of free speech online, the defense of net neutrality and the management of internet infrastructure and content<sup>130</sup>. Whilst liberal democracies have worked to enshrine these principles in their domestic and foreign policies, authoritarian regimes have succeeded to develop methods not depending thereof. They have rather committed to assert their sovereignty as to bolster state control over internet borders, and thus over data flow<sup>131</sup>. In principle the notion of digital authoritarianism has always existed<sup>132</sup>, only, it has recently been spanning with the emergence of rigorous online censorship systems such as the Chinese Great Firewall experts suggest to call networked authoritarianism for that it uses networked technologies to adapt to the internet and sustain legitimacy<sup>133</sup>. Looking at the "Internet Model Control" of the worst abusers of internet freedom<sup>134</sup> is a good place to start.

The censorship system of the Chinese government is a perfect simulation of the assumptions presented before. Not only China has exploited technological progress to serve its political aspirations, but it has also built a fortress for regulation that inspires more than one oppressor from around the world<sup>135</sup>. A strategy deserving careful examination through Lessig's internet regulation thesis to discern what has been happening behind China's closed virtual doors. As for the laws, China's cyberspace restrictions follow strict guidelines that essentially nurture on surveillance technology. Network and social media operators are obliged to register clients / users under their actual names, are compelled to share this data with the relevant authorities and to store it internally. Furthermore, third parties whether foreign or nationals follow strict directives as to the transmission of information and do not hold the right to spread state-banned

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<sup>129</sup> Cybersecurity Initiative, By Robert Morgus and Justin Sherman (2018) *The Idealized Internet vs. Internet Realities* (Version 1.0), Washington DC: Cybersecurity Initiative.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid

<sup>131</sup> Ibid

<sup>132</sup> Ibid

<sup>133</sup> Rebecca MacKinnon (2011) 'Liberation Technology: China's "Networked Authoritarianism"', *Journal of Democracy* Johns Hopkins University Press, 22(2), pp. 32-46 [Online]. Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/427159> (Accessed: 27 June 2019).

<sup>134</sup> Freedom House (2018) *Freedom in the world 2018*, Washington DC : Freedom House

<sup>135</sup> Ibid

content. The applicability of these laws goes beyond the borders of the country, surveillance perseveres abroad to find those who shall be blacklisted, to even curtail the freedom of movement of those whose activism represents a real threat to China's cyber-sovereignty. In this same perspective, the government uses the so-called social scoring system<sup>136</sup> that translates offline behavior of citizens and combines it with their online data traces to establish a regulation framework that will reverberate back in the real world; tightening political mobilization and impacting private life. The system allows public access to allocated credits, announces and rewards those who have performed well with social privileges whereas it omits the enjoyment of individual freedoms and basic rights to the worse achievers. Thereby aiding the establishment of social ostracism based on self-censorship for that citizens with better credits, on the one hand, will no longer want to expose themselves with their counterparts who have shown suspicious behavior by the state, on the other hand, will be forced by the state to exercise online manipulation through coercion, disinformation, and the creation of fake profiles to spy on groups of activists and political opponents. Despite these gross human rights violations, China's foreign policy is thriving and engaging more in multilateral cooperation through the sharing of its "best practices" as well as the training of media elites operating in regimes that are likely to join the establishment of an influential authoritarian network around the world. In sum, China is investing in a multifaceted infrastructure that unleashes the potential of artificial intelligence, and thus allows high-tech targeted surveillance based on facial recognition tools. By striving to become an AI powerhouse by 2030<sup>137</sup>, Chinese government aims for an arbitrary monitoring that encompasses all aspects of life.

Other rulers have been remarkably successful at adapting to the perceived dangers posed to their political authority by the Internet. This is reflected in the increase in Internet-related arrests<sup>138</sup>; dissidents are regularly detained for posts they published, liked or

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid

<sup>137</sup> Ibid

<sup>138</sup> Fredrik Erixon and Hosuk Lee-Makiyama (2011) 'Digital Authoritarianism: Human Rights, Geopolitics and Commerce', Centre for International Political Economy (ECIPE), (5), pp. 2-12 [Online]. Available at: <http://ecipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/digital-authoritarianism-human-rights-geopolitics-and-commerce.pdf> (Accessed: 27 June 2019).

signed online, sometimes they even forcibly disappear and are then prosecuted with espionage or national security-related charges. Resorting to the revocation of access is also widely practiced especially during decisive political times, such as the almost-complete internet blackout ordered by the ruling Transitional Military Council in Sudan amid bloody clashes among-st security forces and civilians to impede their ability to communicate and organize protests having devastating effects not only on the Sudanese people but also on Sudan's economy and the capacity for humanitarian agencies to send support<sup>139</sup>. Although the protesters will cope with the shutdown and find out an effective way to come together, such practices pose a real threat to democracy in the world as they represent a serious breach to the political and civil rights as stated in the ICCPR. Tricking internet users into distraction is a non-violent face of censorship states espouse to disperse the mobilizations that would otherwise have occurred. The rationale behind online political participation is not exact, in fact, a myriad of factors might influence that engagement or a lack thereof which allows dictators to have more options to put in place an effective propaganda strategy that implicitly pushes citizens to seek comfort in entertainment, thereby demobilizing the collective will to pursue democratic change and pulling down the individual belief in the organizing potential of society<sup>140</sup>. Along the pioneering action of Russia that consists of making everyone a journalist in a country where journalism is a crime<sup>141</sup>, many regimes have duplicated it, forcing owners of websites or independent media platforms to obtain a public license where criticism of the government is often deemed false or extremist.

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<sup>139</sup> Katherine Barnett (2019) 'Sudan: Life without the internet', Open Government Access , (67801), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/sudan-life/67801/> (Accessed: 27 June 2019).

<sup>140</sup> Elizabeth Stoycheff and Erik C Nisbet (2016) 'Is Internet Freedom A Tool For Democracy Or Authoritarianism?', The conversation , (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/is-internet-freedom-a-tool-for-democracy-or-authoritarianism-61956> (Accessed: 27 June 2019).

<sup>141</sup> Freedom House (2018) Freedom in the world 2018, Washington DC : Freedom House

### 3.4. Interim Conclusion

Digital authoritarianism is about to take center stage in the campaign for the improvement of human rights conditions on the internet<sup>142</sup>. In hindsight, online censorship has allowed states to envision a long-term geopolitical power they have come to associate with the rebuilding of infrastructures driven by data gathering and the rethinking of an economy where surveillance is the new currency. Thus far, authoritarian practices have the upper hand over digital liberation, thereby impinging on democracy, foreign relations and policy development<sup>143</sup>. It is unwise to assume that the internet progress alone is sufficient for the democratization of repressive regimes<sup>144</sup> nevertheless, it is unfitting to assert that the Internet will never be a catalyst in reforming the authoritarian political systems<sup>145</sup>. The technological revolution is not of reductive simplicity, it is rather a powerful enabler for change that is discursively constructed and substantially negotiated. The contingency of democratization upon the normative character of the hosting ground requires to forcefully deploy the potential of the collective willingness to regain control over the public sphere. The rationale behind this analysis rests on the disregard for the attributes of online political mobilization that pull down the whole process: liberal democracies have to back up, for that any inclination towards digital authoritarianism extends the years of decline the world has come to witness recently. This part of the research has lifted the lid on what is currently happening, the question should no longer concern the Internet's ability to contribute to the findings. It shall be rather accurate to think about better ways to adapt, just like repressive

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<sup>142</sup> Fredrik Erixon and Hosuk Lee-Makiyama (2011) 'Digital Authoritarianism: Human Rights, Geopolitics and Commerce', Centre for International Political Economy (ECIPE), (5), pp. 2-12 [Online]. Available at: <http://ecipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/digital-authoritarianism-human-rights-geopolitics-and-commerce.pdf> (Accessed: 27 June 2019).

<sup>143</sup> Ibid

<sup>144</sup> Rebecca MacKinnon (2011) 'Liberation Technology: China's "Networked Authoritarianism"', Journal of Democracy Johns Hopkins University Press, 22(2), pp. 32-46 [Online]. Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/427159> (Accessed: 27 June 2019).

<sup>145</sup> Fredrik Erixon and Hosuk Lee-Makiyama (2011) 'Digital Authoritarianism: Human Rights, Geopolitics and Commerce', Centre for International Political Economy (ECIPE), (5), pp. 2-12 [Online]. Available at: <http://ecipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/digital-authoritarianism-human-rights-geopolitics-and-commerce.pdf> (Accessed: 27 June 2019).

regimes have done at a time when they were supposedly threatened by the digital advent. We no longer have the privilege of speculating on what we might endure in the future, and we cannot adopt a *laissez-faire* approach while being mindful of the casualties our societies have had to wage in their battle for human rights. Time is running out, whereas emerging technologies and social algorithms are paving the way for authoritarian leaders to expand their control. It is utterly unequivocal, dictatorships recognize and take advantage of the technological opportunities to assert legitimacy. Moreover, the transnational corporations currently taking place announces the beginning of a war against pluralism and diversity, for even media networks consolidate this movement through socially-biased platforms that fuel violence and extremism. And to be credible, illiberal practices also endorse the political narratives and make it more difficult for activists to obtain support from the international community. Therefore, efforts should be invested in people-centered policies to maximize the benefits of the online presence, and promote people-to-people work. To what extent this strategy would be effective, and sustainable? Well, these indicators vary over time and between society, and to reflect upon what could be done to minimize the risks, an understanding of online citizen behavior is accurate to account for the nature of the solutions that could accommodate each social environment. The idea behind this scrutiny may seem ambiguous, but its determinacy is of utmost importance to unlock any positive influence community building may have on the digital rights advocacy.

So far, the research brings to the fore these points: firstly, the trajectory of the internet/authoritarianism conflict is dependent on the nature of the regime. Secondly, political aspirations and the decline/progress of individual liberties prepare the environment for the internet to either flourish or not. Thirdly, making great sense of the geopolitical and economic context is essential for defining actors, stakeholders and victims. Fourthly, the comprehension of the society on a micro-level can effectively direct the trajectory of this conflict for that it reveals the modalities of political participation alongside the stumbling blocks. Ultimately, it is the broad confluence of these forces that determines the depth of the impact on democracy. Consequently, a mere

disregard for one of these forces may have dramatic repercussions on the course of things. As for the last phase, the research will focus on the behavioral aspect of authoritarianism, including the social norms of the public sphere theory, and the assumptions thereof.

## CHAPTER 4

Arm people with a powerful technology and they can triumph over the most brutal adversaries, regardless of what gas and oil prices are at the time<sup>146</sup>. Eight years after the Arab Spring, this idyllic revelation appears emanating from a displaced cyber-utopism and an early exaltation for a digital mutation supposedly facilitating political change<sup>147</sup>. With hindsight on what occurred during the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt, dissidents who took to the streets to claim their rights have rather found in the internet a common space to share their grievances, but in reality, the internet could never solve the issues that have fueled the uprisings such as unemployment, social injustice and economic disaster<sup>148</sup>, whereas it has been used to exercise censorship, preach government activity and discredit opposition through defamation and propaganda. In this respect, authoritarian regimes recourse to creating a psychological firewall<sup>149</sup> that portrays the mobilization on the Internet as a threat to tamp down any political interest, which significantly means that the online behavior can exert a strong opposition hampering repressive digital practices if it does not split among-st slacktivism, self-censorship and passivity<sup>150</sup>. Therefore, it is crucial for this research to understand how citizens perceive and react to censorship, including the campaigns aiming at distraction, disinformation or governmental praising. Do they go unnoticed? Or on the contrary they stimulate the

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<sup>146</sup> Evgeny Morozov in Celia Schahczenski (2011) 'The net delusion: the dark side of internet freedom', Montana Tech, 22(1), pp. 394.

<sup>147</sup> Amaelle Guiton (2016) Printemps arabes du cyberutopisme au cyberpessimisme, Available at: [https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2016/01/16/printemps-arabes-du-cyberutopisme-au-cyberpessimisme\\_1426826](https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2016/01/16/printemps-arabes-du-cyberutopisme-au-cyberpessimisme_1426826) (Accessed: 05 June 2019).

<sup>148</sup> Lorraine Millot (2011) Le net, instrument de libération et d'oppression, Available at: [https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/03/05/le-net-instrument-de-liberation-et-d-oppression\\_719368](https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/03/05/le-net-instrument-de-liberation-et-d-oppression_719368) (Accessed: 05 June 2019).

<sup>149</sup> Ibid

<sup>150</sup> Elizabeth Stoycheff and Erik C Nisbet (2016) 'Is Internet Freedom A Tool For Democracy Or Authoritarianism?', The conversation , (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/is-internet-freedom-a-tool-for-democracy-or-authoritarianism-61956> (Accessed: 27 June 2019).

interest of users to discern the underside of the lines. The latter assumption requires a sound knowledge of the political context which pushes the reflection to think about whether the lack of political participation in authoritarian countries aids the regimes to expand surveillance on their populations and assert authority over the online discourses or not, given the fact that political engagement is unlikely to be high in those countries<sup>151</sup>. In an attempt to unveil the behavioral side that governs the internet, this chapter will answer all of the above.

#### **4.1. PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

There is no such research that renders clear findings about the dimensions of political participation under authoritarian regimes. Most political communication scholarship examines the communication processes of citizens who reside only in countries with open and free media systems<sup>152</sup>. The investigation is lacking as to the boundaries of online resistance to censorship. In other words, what drives citizens to behave indifferently in media censored environments ? on the other hand, what motivates others not to fall into slacktivism and rather continue to mobilize towards democratic governance. In order to examine more closely the proposed dynamics, this analysis will be based on the results of two empirical studies conducted in democratic countries.

##### **A typology of political participation online: the 2015 British elections**

Democracies are no exception as to the propaganda campaigns that happened worldwide during electoral times. In conjunction with this, political activity reaches its peak, allowing space to different stakeholders with conflicting interests to dominate the public discourse, and so it becomes interesting to establish a study that focuses on the nature of

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<sup>151</sup> Pew Research Center (2014) Many in emerging and developing nations disconnected from politics, Available at: <https://esadespacespublics.wordpress.com/2012/03/19/6-lespace-public-chez-habermas-ideal-degenescence-espoir-democratique/> (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

<sup>152</sup> Golnoosh Behrouzian, Eric C.Nisbet, Aysenur Dal (2016) 'Resisting censorship: how citizens navigate closed media environments ', International Journal of Communication, 10(1), pp. 4345-4367.



the actors who participate in the leverage of these activities. As a matter of fact, Twitter is commonly used during electoral campaigns because of its interface that enables real-time information transmission and a global and visible prevalence in the digital public sphere through the use of hashtags, which obviously facilitates the outreach and help in spreading the word. In short, the present study aims to establish a typology of online political participation that focuses in particular on the behavior of citizens and the motives behind while isolating the calls for mobilization in data collection for more precision<sup>153</sup>. A content analysis of the most influential Twitter posts has shown that citizens are likely to be more active than political parties, and that those who have shown regular performance are typically supporters of nationalist parties<sup>154</sup>. And besides, calls for political actions have got to be among-st the most predominant strategies used by citizens to enact mobilization on Twitter<sup>155</sup> which might be at odds with how the contribution of individuals is often represented in the international community, thereby giving sense to the rationale of this experiment. Admittedly, the observed sample does not make it possible to enact a verdict or to generalize, however, concluded typology underscores key elements deserving further inspection: firstly, the idea of participatory democracy on which the theory of the public sphere focuses should be an integral part of the notion of individual behavior. Although the British context differentiates from the cases under censorship, the human potentiality remains unequivocally relevant to the democratization process. Therefore, there is reason to find out why political parties in authoritarian regimes do not trigger citizens commitment to call for actions. Secondly, social media has proved their capacity to be of purpose for multiple domains, and yet political parties are still at the margins of technology which might impact how citizens look at the online political participation. Finally, in authoritarian countries where Twitter is less likely to attract people, does this insinuate a review of internet-enabled networks

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<sup>153</sup> (2017) 'A typology of political participation online: how citizens used Twitter to mobilize during the 2015 British general elections', *Information Communication & Society Journal*, 20(11), pp. 1625-1643 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369118x.2016.1252413?journalCode=rics20> (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

<sup>154</sup> Ibid

<sup>155</sup> Ibid

uses is necessary to accommodate the various possible pathways citizens are envisaging to participate in the politics of the digital age<sup>156</sup> ?

## Comparing established and third wave democracies

This second case study complements the first and the questions raised thereof, as it investigates whether and how informal political talk on digital media contributes to citizens' political participation through surveys based on samples representative of internet users in seven Western democracies<sup>157</sup>. The research empirically tested attitudes as regard to a set of digital platforms and modes of institutional and extra-institutional participation<sup>158</sup>. The variance between the demographic characteristics of the chosen countries has discursively endorsed the changes in behavioral patterns, though the surveys are imperfect tools to measure digital traces and grasp practices online, they were of significant value to consistently and simultaneously reflect upon the observed results. The acknowledged limitations were mainly resting on the self-reported data reliance and accounting of the cross-sectional nature of the domain. Overall, the scrutiny has demonstrated that online political participation increases with more proven institutional engagement, whereas citizens behavior is more forceful in established democracies than in third waves<sup>159</sup> democracies. Furthermore, the examinations of talks on mobile instant messaging platforms has not detected any meaningful difference between the countries : this supports the suggestions noted from the Twitter case since obtaining such appealing similarity between seven geographical confines endorses the importance to question the use behind each online channel and to account for the fact some technologies yield loads of effective participatory benefits<sup>160</sup> than others, which progressively unleash more mobilization. And so this implies that the behavioral dimension is intrinsic both for the

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid

<sup>157</sup> Cristian Vaccari, Augusto Valeriani (2018) 'Digital political talk and political participation: comparing established and third wave democracies', Sage Journal, (), pp. 1-14 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244018784986> (Accessed: 10 June 2019).

<sup>158</sup> Ibid

<sup>159</sup> In this survey, third waves democracies refer to Greece, Poland and Spain

<sup>160</sup> Cristian Vaccari, Augusto Valeriani (2018) 'Digital political talk and political participation: comparing established and third wave democracies', Sage Journal, (), pp. 1-14 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244018784986> (Accessed: 05 June 2019).

public sphere and for the internet scholarship. Finally, the contribution of the institutional indicator is worth shedding light on, not only it recalls the Twitter electoral typology where political affiliation rhymes with civic diligence, but it also brings to the fore the role institutions shall play to fostering democratic governance in real life in order to document more activism and to witness an increase of political interest both offline and online.

### **Closing thoughts**

This comparative analysis has led to the consideration of new avenues when addressing such a cross-cutting issue about the internet and democracy. Not only, it has proved that the internet alone is not ready or sufficient to maintain political spirit, but it has also proved that neither democracy is enough to boost the digital sphere. Thus far, it seems that the confluence of the two is equivocally able to promote political participation, or at least it shall not be deemed to judge as long as a proper investigation of the online behavior has not taken place. Moreover, the institutional legacy should be predominant in the public discourse to inspire and nurture civic engagement and to facilitate the interaction of technology and these institutions to shaping the political outcomes.

## **4.2. CENSORSHIP BEHAVIOR**

It is frequent that a huge number of research on digital authoritarianism tackles censorship whether from a human rights based approach, or other perspectives. Whereas it is less likely to come across a paper that looks at the patterns of behavior that outline censorship and that consequently reveal another dark side of the internet freedom<sup>161</sup>. Although direct empirical evidence about the effect of removing censorship is limited<sup>162</sup>, a number of communication studies and real cases espouse the lines of censorship and public reactivity:

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<sup>161</sup> Evgeny Morozov (2011) *The net delusion: the dark side of internet freedom*, Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.

<sup>162</sup> Yuyu Chen, David Y. Yang (2018) 'The Impact of media censorship: evidence from a field experiment in china', *Stanford Edu*, (), pp. 1-134.

The failure of the Arab spring activism to survive during a period of mass social mobilization and supposedly enormous desire for resistance often holds governments accountable on themselves. To a large extent, the latter is true in view of the documented violence dissidents faced primarily from state actors. However, the missing part of the story is the division of the digital sphere which dramatically changed the course of things<sup>163</sup>. On the one hand, many have overestimated the power of clicking, sharing on their social media profiles or signing a petition to the point they have believed their slacktivism to be beyond adequate for a democratic transition<sup>164</sup>, whereas others have completely tuned out of politics and have rather immersed themselves in online entertainment which had gradually let them think being satisfied with living under autocratic conditions<sup>165</sup>. Not least of all, those who have chosen to join the governmental army of online defenders through sneaking into groups of the opposition or sharing disturbing information related to the political detainees to push citizens seek safe content to avoid meeting a similar fate. In sum, these behavioral changes have been backed by the regime's authoritarian practices that sometimes exploit them to distract, sometimes to launch a fake campaign on the status quo and others to flee media coverage.

Two mediation-based surveys conducted on Internet users in Russia and Ukraine ranked online behavior as capital or recreational towards the democratic potentiality<sup>166</sup>. Citizens demand for democracy has been more prevalent when internet was associated with capital-enhancing, which has triggered constructive criticisms of the incumbent regime, while the leisure on the internet has been associated with more rooted authoritarian global visions<sup>167</sup>. These results, established in non-democracies recognized by censorship, show

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<sup>163</sup> Lorraine Millot (2011) Le net, instrument de libération et d'oppression, Available at: [https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/03/05/le-net-instrument-de-liberation-et-d-oppression\\_719368](https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/03/05/le-net-instrument-de-liberation-et-d-oppression_719368) (Accessed: 05 June 2019).

<sup>164</sup> Ibid and see Lorraine Millot (2011) Le net, instrument de libération et d'oppression, Available at: [https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/03/05/le-net-instrument-de-liberation-et-d-oppression\\_719368](https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/03/05/le-net-instrument-de-liberation-et-d-oppression_719368) (Accessed: 05 June 2019)

<sup>165</sup> Elizabeth Stoycheff and Erik C Nisbet (2016) 'Is Internet Freedom A Tool For Democracy Or Authoritarianism?', *The conversation*, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/is-internet-freedom-a-tool-for-democracy-or-authoritarianism-61956> (Accessed: 27 June 2019).

<sup>166</sup> Stoycheff, E., Nisbet, E. C. and Epstein, D. (2016) 'Differential Effects of Capital-Enhancing and Recreational Internet Use on Citizens' Demand for Democracy', *Communication Research*.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid

that the Internet would only be able to unlock its democratic power if users or citizens in general aspire to do so. A double-edged sword feature that requires special attention, as a simple decline in actions and talks could cause drastic harm to democratization efforts<sup>168</sup>.

From China, a third research has empirically examined whether citizens with access to uncensored Internet will seek politically sensitive information and whether the acquisition of the latter will influence their comportment<sup>169</sup>. As a matter of fact, behavior alongside political attitudes were tracked for more than 18 months involving a random sample of 1800 university students in Beijing<sup>170</sup>. This experiment has been rich in inputs for that it has given the students the option to choose between using the internet that is subject to strict surveillance or on the contrary to bypass censorship for free throughout the period of the experiment. While observing the decision process of the treatment, surveys have been implemented to measure the knowledge of the participants about the political situation as well as to directly test their positions towards a range of relevant issues. The results shown have indicated almost none has spent time checking hidden content or even browsing blocked websites. Furthermore, more than half of the students have chosen not to use the censorship free internet, whereas those who did have not changed their behavior nor have they consumed any politically sensitive information. Relying on the surveys' outcomes, the study supposes that the low demand for uncensored matters is unlikely to be linked to the fear of reprisal but it is rather connected to an environment China has succeeded to merge citizens and any attempt to destabilize it would be at risk to collapse.

The aftermath of the previous case studies has displaced similarities in terms of the attitudes towards authoritarianism even when the situation was permitting “better” reactions. An other re-comparison with the findings of the democratic state will lead the analysis towards highlighting the argument of the involvement of political institutions in

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<sup>168</sup> Elizabeth Stoycheff and Erik C Nisbet (2016) 'Is Internet Freedom A Tool For Democracy Or Authoritarianism?', *The conversation*, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/is-internet-freedom-a-tool-for-democracy-or-authoritarianism-61956> (Accessed: 27 June 2019).

<sup>169</sup> Yuyu Chen, David Y. Yang (2018) 'The Impact of media censorship: evidence from a field experiment in china', *Stanford Edu*, (), pp. 1-134.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid

the implementation of a balanced system that takes into account the importance of promoting active engagement and the citizenship of each individual, as well as to examining the possible alternatives to use discursive practices in online networks to participate in public life and political process<sup>171</sup>. On the other hand, the vigorous return of the territory, the reaffirmation of the authorities on the internet<sup>172</sup> along with the adaptation of the regimes to the use and the evolution of technology have enabled them to retool their online strategies according to the variability in behavior and context as a powerful way to demobilize citizens and gradually deter them from pursuing democratic change<sup>173</sup>. And so, it has become critical to thoroughly understand the constituents of cultural identity, citizenship and religion – as seen as the new opium of the digital mass<sup>174</sup> – to be able to advance the policies that will effectively know how to tackle censorship without putting the citizens at the margin of the conversations, thereby rendering them passive, overwhelmed or simply uninterested by what is happening.

#### 4.2.1. CYBER-SPEECH CASCADE

Internet censorship is much more fragile than it seems<sup>175</sup>. This assumption is concerned with the fact that authoritarian regimes are not able to completely censor the internet given its architecture, the volume and the rapidity of online communication<sup>176</sup>, thereby making their digital authoritarianism necessarily dependent on self-censorship to ensure continuous information control led by multiple state run parties that are specifically

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<sup>171</sup> kiran bhatia, Manisha Pathack (2019) 'Examining the significance of online discursive engagement as a form of civic participation', *Global Media Journal*, 11(1), pp. 2-19 [Online]. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/39747307/Examining\\_the\\_significance\\_of\\_online\\_discursive\\_engagement\\_as\\_a\\_form\\_of\\_civic\\_participation?email\\_work\\_card=title](https://www.academia.edu/39747307/Examining_the_significance_of_online_discursive_engagement_as_a_form_of_civic_participation?email_work_card=title) (Accessed: 05 June 2019).

<sup>172</sup> Lorraine Millot (2011) *Le net, instrument de libération et d'oppression*, Available at: [https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/03/05/le-net-instrument-de-liberation-et-d-oppression\\_719368](https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/03/05/le-net-instrument-de-liberation-et-d-oppression_719368) (Accessed: 05 June 2019)

<sup>173</sup> Elizabeth Stoycheff and Erik C Nisbet (2016) 'Is Internet Freedom A Tool For Democracy Or Authoritarianism?', *The conversation*, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/is-internet-freedom-a-tool-for-democracy-or-authoritarianism-61956> (Accessed: 27 June 2019).

<sup>174</sup> Evgeny Morozov in Celia Schahczenski (2011) 'The net delusion: the dark side of internet freedom', *Montana Tech*, 22(1), pp. 394.

<sup>175</sup> Bryan Druzin, Gregory Gordon (2017) 'Authoritarianism and the internet', *Journal of the American Bar Foundation*, (), pp. 1-25.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid

trained to deliver such activities. In that sense, an army of pro-government is deployed to delete content critical of the state, to monitor dissidents who pose a threat to national security and to ensure that the status-quo censorship flows smoothly. In form, self-censorship relies on individual acts of defiance, in substance, it is made of collective feelings of paranoia: a shaky foundation advancing a model of thrust which renders it easy to collapse<sup>177</sup>. To what extent this is likely to be true, A closer look at the cascade theory is key to discern this reality.

#### **4.2.2. Cascade theory:**

This theory is a set of informational cascade borrowed from the economic literature and of related concepts of norms and availability in legal literature. It serves to explain social imitation, in which citizens adopt the mass behavior<sup>178</sup>. Experts “call upon ideas like informational cascades to describe how peripheral knowledge can pervade a society, changing the perceptions and realities of political power<sup>179</sup>” for that an informational cascade represents the shifting in behavior that happens when an individual adopt another position respective of the conduct of one another<sup>180</sup>. A repetitive process based on the available and constructed information which reinforces the power of information, thereby allowing authoritarian regime to make strategic use of it where applicable to influence the behavior of the most vulnerable who in turn too, impact those who are prone to mass behavior and thus chain a powerful cascade of information that is self-censored and reliable<sup>181</sup>. In addition, the interest for maintaining social acceptance encourages people to change their public discourses, which incorporates concerns of reputation to the informational cascade as known as availability cascades extending the plausibility of the former model of self-censorship through increasing its variability in advancing its own

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid

<sup>178</sup> Ibid

<sup>179</sup> Joyce (2010, 211), in Bryan Druzin, Gregory Gordon (2017) 'Authoritarianism and the internet', Journal of the American Bar Foundation, (), pp. 1-25.

<sup>180</sup> Bryan Druzin, Gregory Gordon (2017) 'Authoritarianism and the internet', Journal of the American Bar Foundation, (), pp. 1-25.

<sup>181</sup> Anderson, Lisa R. and Charles A. Hol (1997) 'Information cascades in the laboratory', American Economic Review, 87(5), pp. 847-862.

agenda<sup>182</sup>. Finally, the sudden transformation in social norms generates an alteration in the voicing of public views exposing scenes where any clash with the social norm paradigm might entail a breakdown. It is the association of the informational cascade, availability cascade and norms cascade that generates the cyber-speech cascade that solely relates to the political upheavals as a catalyst rather than a cause. It is of empirical support to providing a partial explanation for censorship under authoritarian regimes: the uncertainty built between the different components create a legal ambiguity that prompts self-censorship, however, the model permits high shifts in risk at a structural level which contributes to disruption in the online censorial control<sup>183</sup>. The study of the cyber-speech bolsters the reasoning made on the Arab Spring, which also embodies the Lessig's theory on the internet regulation, for that they both encompass the level of social standards, the content transmission factor and infrastructural constraints, thus enabling an understanding that covers the relationships between the online behavior, censorship and the establishment of democratic public spheres<sup>184</sup>.

### 4.3. Interim Conclusion

When President Erdogan used Face-Time to call for the people's will against the military coup that aimed to depose him<sup>185</sup>, Turkish citizens have responded and have come together to defend their right to democracy. A story among others that acknowledges the triumph internet may achieve over authoritarianism<sup>186</sup>. The irony lies in the fact that President Erdogan has repeatedly attacked the dominance of communication technologies over the public discourse, and has frequently described it as a threat to social life as well as a threat to national security<sup>187</sup>. Besides, the same President who used Face-Time has

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<sup>182</sup> Kuran and Sunstein (1999) in Bryan Druzin, Gregory Gordon (2017) 'Authoritarianism and the internet', Journal of the American Bar Foundation, (), pp. 1-25.

<sup>183</sup> Bryan Druzin, Gregory Gordon (2017) 'Authoritarianism and the internet', Journal of the American Bar Foundation, (), pp. 1-25.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid

<sup>185</sup> Elizabeth Stoycheff and Erik C Nisbet (2016) 'Is Internet Freedom A Tool For Democracy Or Authoritarianism?', The conversation, (), pp. [Online]. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/is-internet-freedom-a-tool-for-democracy-or-authoritarianism-61956> (Accessed: 27 June 2019).

<sup>186</sup> Ibid

<sup>187</sup> Ibid



blocked access to several websites and has increasingly cracked down on the internet freedom<sup>188</sup>. Certainly, this duality in the use of the Internet becomes more and more complex but what remains always intriguing is the power of resistance against such control. In China, some dissidents have been inspired by the richness for different tones Chinese language entails to create allusory code-words and euphemisms in order to defy online censorship<sup>189</sup>. This strategy channels the interest in the sense that it uses language - a human potential - as a weapon even the machine can not recognize<sup>190</sup>, for that even internet control can never be accomplished to the point of deciphering social relations. So why the resistance does not go all the way in censorial regimes? Just as we have seen in China too, the government has managed to integrate the majority of citizens into the environment, not only have they become satisfied with the practices they have to experience daily, but they have began contributing to the creation of unfavorable spaces for activists who steadily refuse to bow to authoritarianism. And we can fully understand these shifts in reactions by referring to the norms cascade which poses a huge challenge and rises tensions between those who are "distinguished" by their anti-state attitudes and those who claim themselves to be supposedly natural. Another appalling issue arising out of the China language example is the difference between the behavior within a same country: why some are more likely to choose to risk while others prefer not to be involved ? This brings us back to online political participation in democratic countries, where citizens are expected to be active and committed to the shaping of political narratives, whereas apart from the fact that there is an individual preference which can not be neglected, the contribution of political institutions is essential to demonstrate how an infrastructural resistance is possible through individual agency, social collaboration and institutional reinforcement. Besides, Habermas theory has reported the lack of the structural dimension in the internet as a hindrance to the amplification of its potentiality to democratize and, when there is no interest from the citizens authoritarian states exploit

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid

<sup>189</sup> Jeanette Si (2017) The Chinese language as a weapon: how China's netizens fight censorship, Available at: <https://medium.com/berkman-klein-center/the-chinese-language-as-a-weapon-how-chinas-netizens-fight-censorship-8389516ed1a6> (Accessed: 05 June 2019).

<sup>190</sup> Ibid

this weakness to impose sovereignty and affirm authority, and thus root censorship and control and render them more sustainable. Last but not least, the cultural legacy, social context of each country does set too the boundaries of online behavior and censorship, those who do not sink into ignorance are less likely to get manipulated or distracted whereas those who are marginalized are more often to reject external views on the regime and to even not consider any foreign media coverage because for them the states' spokespersons, the national TV and other state-run newspapers are more trustworthy and reliable<sup>191</sup>. Therefore, for a global perception of online behavior with respect to the rise of digital authoritarianism, all of the theories introduced and the instruments initiated in this research should be taken into account while, at the same time, aspiring for outcomes involving citizens at all levels of the decision-making process to ensure transparency, awareness and liability.

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<sup>191</sup> Yuyu Chen, David Y. Yang (2018) 'The Impact of media censorship: evidence from a field experiment in china', Stanford Edu , (), pp. 1-134.

## FINAL CONCLUSION

Reaffirming the need to understand the cross-sectional dimension of the internet scholarship. Bearing in mind the ubiquitous usage of communication technologies in social and political life, and deeply concerned about the ever-increasing number of online human rights violations. This research aimed to investigate the rationale behind the rise of digital authoritarianism and whether the internet is to be blamed. While the first chapter has established the legal framework crucial to perceiving the infringement of digital rights, the second chapter has discursively constructed the institutional foundation through the examination of the internet as a public sphere. In sum, the third chapter has closely scrutinized the online authoritarian features to permit an analysis of the behavioral patterns throughout the last part of the paper. As for the resulting conclusions and the recommendations, they will be discussed herein-after.

### 5.1. Findings:

The international community is mindful of the digital advent and it is constantly recalling the opportunities digitalization has brought in the last decades. At the same time, it is alarmed by the violations occurring to the freedom of expression and opinion, the right to privacy and the freedom of assembly. To date, many legal instruments have been implemented to safeguard the universal values enshrined in the UDHR. In this respect, a landmark resolution has been adopted to recognize the importance to promote the same rights offline, online. And yet, the world is unpacking 13 years of democracy decline and witnessing the emergence of sophisticated surveillance systems targeting the political mobilization, civil spaces and taking control over the flow of information. Thus far, the

infrastructure of the internet seems unequivocally hampering the efforts to counter regulation and provide censor-free digital platforms. Moreover, the drastic shifts in the public sphere have challenged any attempt to pursue democratic change. In that sense, the Habermas theory was essential to gain a comprehension of participatory democracy as an integral part of the public discourses, but the Habermas' dispute between mass media and technological developments rendered the concept susceptible to abrupt collapse. Whereas the Arab Uprising case study has consistently displayed the conflict trajectory where the internet appeared as the medium to amplify voices: it is the nature of the voices which clarify, to the extent possible, whether the internet would foster the democratization process or not, and under authoritarian regimes, those who prone the government are likely to assert authority, control public scrutiny, and set the boundaries of the echo. Furthermore, dictatorships have acquired practices to bolster state control over internet borders and sustain legitimacy. Their strategy is nothing new, same targeted audiences with better tools. From shrinking civil spaces, through tamping down political interest to exercising self-censorship: all means are deemed necessary when online activity supposedly threatens national security. The Lessig's theory has exhaustively listed the internet regulation pillars: law, social norms, architecture and the market. The social norms component has triggered the last chapter of the dissertation, for that it encompasses the changing in behaviors that is lacking investigation in the domain. As of this part, the results were as follows:

- 1) Generally speaking, there is a cyber-utopism worldview about the internet. The latter is often portrayed as a powerful enabler, a forceful tool for change and an economic springboard.
- 2) The internet in form and substance does not satisfy Habermas' requirement for the public sphere. Nevertheless, it is to be considered as a sphere for public discourses that are not necessarily of political character.
- 3) Authoritarian regimes exploit the status quo, particularly in times of transition, to spread fear of governmental reprisal: in doing so, they use the power of distraction, they start propaganda campaigns for defamation and disinformation and they retool their

online surveillance tactics according to the political context, nature of the dissents, and depending on media coverage.

4) As long as there is a state concentration in all powers, it is unlikely that the internet would aid democratic consolidation, unless there is a strong resistance to shake the public institutions, nurture individual agency and call for collective collaboration. Therefore, there is end to explore the online citizen behavior.

How does online behavior affect the political status quo ? Well, the analysis of two empirical studies in democracies has shown that online political participation has consequences for the health of democracy. Any disinterest thereof would lead to destabilized communities. Moreover, this experiment is also linked with the quality of democratic governance citizens strive to see. Thus, they should be able to envision such a significant change in their life and to contribute to its realization. Still, the involvement of the institutions should no longer be symbolically negotiated, it should rather be endorsed through civic engagement and proper usage of technology tools as well as social networks. In contract to this context, online behavior in non-democratic countries is much more of a complex puzzle. The findings thereof have underscored three main analytic dimensions in the cyber-speech cascade: information, availability and norms. In fact, they are conform to the assumptions made in the other chapters. The Arab Spring case study has confirmed how does the information flow induce censorship, whereas the Chinese social scoring system has proved how reputation and norms drive people to self-censorship and social ostracism. While the disregard for political engagement is still predominant in dictatorships, while state control is rooted in the local realities, there is a need to probe whether improvements of government-citizen relationship is likely to happen and/or to flourish. This is what the following recommendations will look at.

## **5.2. Recommendations**

Reiterating the need for a policy framework taking into account the findings of the digitization scholarship. We will recall the best practices to map out the way forward digital freedom.

OECD Going Digital Project:

“ The speed of what's happening online is challenging the existing institutions we have for policy making ” Andrew Wyckoff

Digitalization is a cross-cutting, challenging and demanding policy framework. Therefore, for digitalization to reach its full potential, it is crucial to adopt an action-oriented, evidence-based and multi-stakeholder approach to tackle shortcomings engendered by classic policies as well as to prevent the inequality gaps that would be created over time. Going Digital Project is betting on effective measurement to make digitalization works for all. In this regard, and under the auspices of the Going Digital Project, OECD developed policies that governments must consider to realize a digital transformation that improves lives, boosts economic growth and foster well-being. These policies are structured along seven main blocks: access, use, innovation, trust, jobs, society and market openness, and are supported by quantitative indicators and practical policy guidance<sup>192</sup>. Here is a combination of the best take-away messages from the OECD Going Digital Project and the Lessig's thesis to fight good fights against the digital authoritarianism:

**Law:**

- Need for a coherent government approach striving for outcomes that put people at the center
- Importance of safeguarding fundamental rights in the digital age: Research about what triggers countries and companies to do something about it.
- The road-map for the future can only be effective, if the policies are improving lives.
- If we cannot measure authoritarianism, we cannot manage it. Hence, future research should invest in measurement.

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<sup>192</sup> OECD (2019) Going Digital, Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/going-digital/project/> (Accessed: 12 July 2019)

- Governance of data should become a priority, for that data is the new currency so it will reshape the political narratives.

**Norms:**

- Preparing people and governments to turn technologies into human development
- Striving for a world where like-minded liberal democracies show and share their initiatives
- Reducing inequalities, fostering inclusion and pluralism
- Joining multilateral efforts to counter hate speech and extremism
- Fighting social ostracism through designing for diversity

**Architecture & Market:**

- Strengthening trust and driving data should be done while monitoring and shaping
- Digital tools should not be corrosive for the social fabric
- Usage of free educational resources
- Adopting technology determinism through exploring technology, market forces
- Rethinking an open, free online market

Helping countries assess their digital development will hold them accountable and liable for impingement on individual freedoms. Thus, we will achieve more transparency, strive for balance between technology and policy, and promote sustainability.

Last but not least, monitoring and analyzing the aftermath of the OECD Going Digital will provide us with a strong foundation and a global vision of what policy-making should become in the digital era.

## **Closing remarks**

The battle against online authoritarianism is rather about our resilience than anything else. As technological forces are hacking our minds, we need to keep resilient in order not to fall into self-censorship, social ostracism, and cascade mass behavior. To achieve such a level of resistance, research should lift the lid on the shifts between technology and policy to grasp the reality of digital authoritarianism, and more emphasis should be given to the social structure of the societies for us to get a comprehensive understanding of the individual behavior in the social collaboration, and for us to build a digital humanism where machines fail to stifle our freedoms. Finally, digital authoritarianism cannot survive in pluralism, multiculturalism and ethics. It is definitely time to bring our human values back!



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# Annexes

Digital technologies and data are transformational. People, firms and governments live, interact, work and produce differently than in the past, and these changes are accelerating rapidly. How can we realise the immense promises of digital technologies and data for growth and well-being in a fast evolving world? *Going Digital: Shaping Policies, Improving Lives* charts the road ahead. It identifies seven policy dimensions that allow governments – together with citizens, firms and stakeholders – to shape digital transformation to improve lives (Figure 1). Each of these dimensions brings together multiple interrelated policy areas that require effective co-ordination to realise the promises of digital transformation. The report also highlights key opportunities and challenges related to each dimension, offers new insights, evidence and analysis, and provides recommendations for better policies in the digital age.

**Figure 1. Going Digital Integrated Policy Framework**



### Key cross-cutting recommendations

- Shape digital transformation and improve lives using the Going Digital Integrated Policy Framework.
- Bridge divides to allow people and firms to take advantage of digital opportunities. Ensure access to high-quality and affordable broadband for all and close the digital gender, age, income and education gaps.
- Empower people with the skills needed to succeed in a digital economy and society. Get ready for a massive training challenge, fundamentally rethink education systems, foster foundational skills and life-long learning, address concerns around emerging forms of work, and improve social protection to ensure that no one is left behind.
- Enhance access to data to drive digital innovation among people, firms and governments, while taking into account legitimate national, private and security interests; promote interoperable privacy regimes to facilitate cross-border data flows.
- Embrace a global digital agenda that addresses new and complex issues, including competition dynamics; privacy; data and cross-border data flows; inequalities and their relationship with digital transformation; trust in government; democracy in the digital age; the future of the firm; and better measurement of digital transformation.



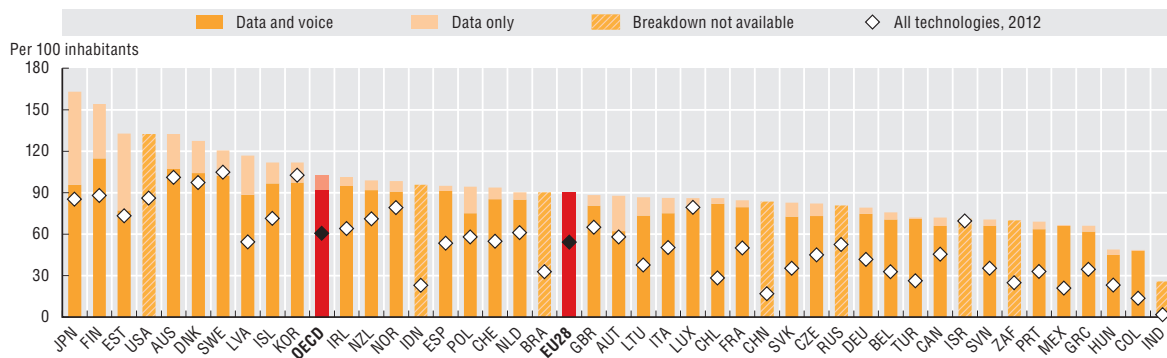
## Enhancing access to communications infrastructures, services and data

Demands on networks are growing as more people, things and activities go online. By 2022, there will be three connected devices per person around the globe. In December 2017, mobile broadband subscriptions rose above one subscription per inhabitant for the first time (Figure 2), and over the course of 2017 mobile data usage more than doubled in many countries. The Internet of Things is on the rise, with machine-to-machine subscriptions having almost doubled across the OECD over 2014-17.

Even as increasingly more connections are wireless, the speed and rate of download of these connections ultimately depends on the capacity of fixed networks, which take on the “heavy lifting” of the increasing demands on wireless networks. In 2016, about 60% of data uploaded and downloaded on devices such as smartphones used fixed networks through Wi-Fi or small, low-power cellular base stations. However, in many countries, networks may not be ready to support projected demand; currently, there are only 7 fibre subscriptions per 100 people across the OECD. In particular, rural areas lag behind urban and other areas in access to fast fixed broadband. In addition, access to data increasingly underpins digital transformation.

**Figure 2. There are more mobile broadband subscriptions than people in the OECD**

*Mobile broadband subscriptions, per 100 inhabitants, by package type, December 2017*



Note: See Statlink for figure notes.

Source: See StatLink  <https://doi.org/10.1787/888933914974>.

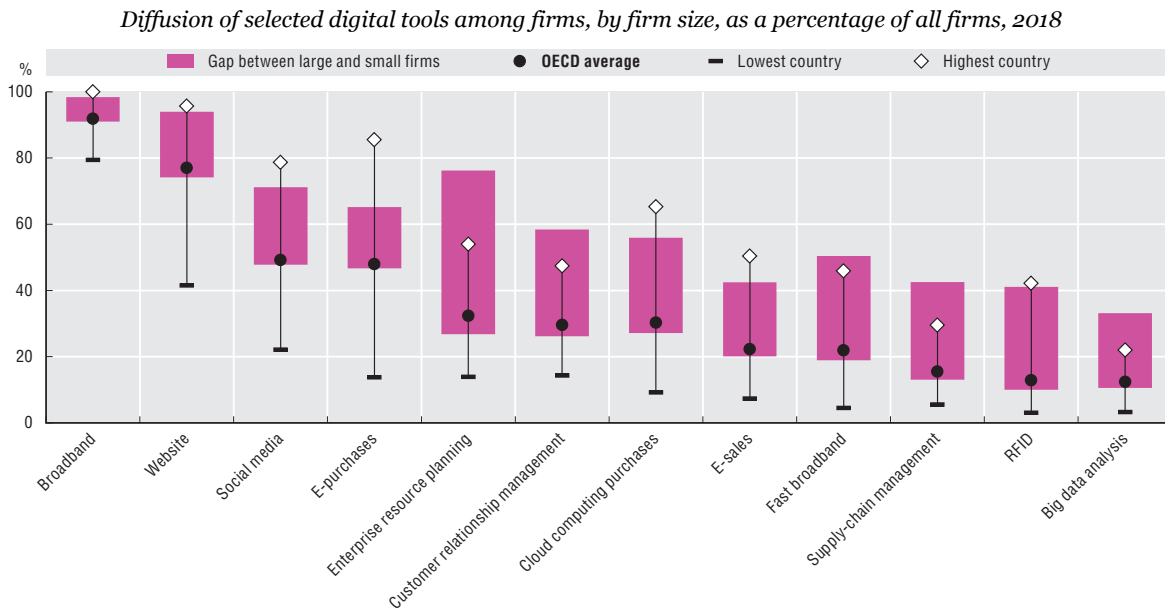
### Enhancing access: What matters most for policy?

- Promote competition to drive investment in communications infrastructures and services. Depending on local market conditions, the presence of more mobile network operators (e.g. four rather than three) can result in more competitive and innovative services, and passive infrastructure sharing and co-investment can help extend coverage.
- Ensure technical enablers are in place, such as Internet exchange points, efficient allocation of spectrum, and new generation Internet protocol addresses. Reduce administrative barriers to investment such as burdensome licensing requirements and complex rights of way.
- Boost connectivity in rural and remote areas, for example by investing directly in high-speed fixed networks or incentivising private investment, including by competitive tendering, tax exemptions, low interest loans or lower spectrum fees.
- Enhance access to and sharing of data, while balancing its benefits with the risks, taking into account legitimate national, private and security interests, for example through contractual agreements, restricted data sharing arrangements, data portability, and open government data.

## Increasing effective use of digital technologies and data

Most people and organisations use digital tools, but often far from their full potential. While 72% of individuals use the Internet for email, less than 60% visit or interact with public authorities' websites and only 9% take online courses. Nearly all firms are connected, but only 11% of small firms perform big data analysis compared to 33% of large firms (Figure 3). Skills are key to closing the gap in sophisticated Internet use, including of digital government services, and wider diffusion of advanced digital tools in firms. However, only 31% of adults have sufficient problem-solving skills to thrive in a digital world. In addition, mistrust remains a barrier to use: security concerns hold back around 15% of EU citizens from Internet banking and ordering goods or services online.

**Figure 3. Large potential remains for diffusion of digital tools among firms, especially small and medium-sized enterprises**



Note: See Statlink for figure notes.

Source: See StatLink  <https://doi.org/10.1787/888933914841>.

### Increasing effective use: What matters most for policy?

- Close the usage gap between those with high versus low education levels and empower everyone with a mix of skills to thrive and trust in a digital world. To do so, it is important to review education and training systems and better exploit the possibilities of digital learning.
- Boost diffusion of digital tools to drive productivity growth in firms, and small and medium-sized enterprises in particular, by promoting investment in digital technologies and intangible assets (e.g. patents, software) and fostering business dynamism and structural change that encourages adoption.
- Shift from an e-government to a holistic and user-driven digital government approach, while further improving online public services and ensuring coherent use of digital technologies and data across all parts and levels of government.
- Address mistrust to increase online engagement by raising awareness and empowering people and businesses to better manage digital risks.

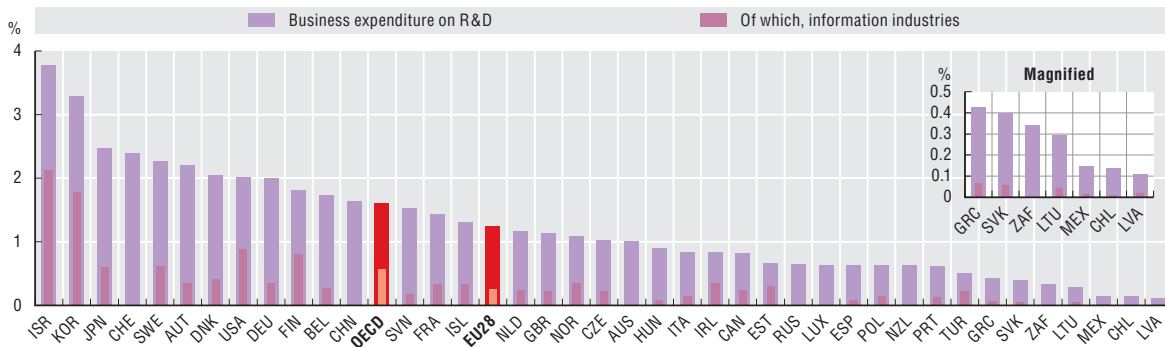
## Unleashing data-driven and digital innovation

Data-driven and digital innovation are on the rise. In the first half of 2018, artificial intelligence start-ups received 12% of private equity investment worldwide and the share is increasing in all major economies. The VC industry appears to evolve quickly – the People’s Republic of China (hereafter “China”), for example, went from having almost no venture capital investments in AI in 2015 to being the second largest recipient in 2017. Not all countries innovate in the same way or to the same extent: over 2013-16, about 60% of China’s patents were in information and communications technologies (ICTs) compared to about 33% of OECD countries’ patents.

The private sector contributes the lion’s share of research and development (R&D), a key driver of digital innovation. R&D spending by business represented almost three-quarters of all R&D expenditure in 2016, or 1.6% of GDP on average across the OECD, with information industries contributing about one third (Figure 4). However, in 2017 government spending on R&D across the OECD was 8% below the levels in 2009 in real terms. Digital-intensive sectors like the ICT sector, which have higher shares of young firms than other sectors in most OECD countries, are particularly dynamic and innovative.

**Figure 4. R&D, especially in information industries, is a key driver of digital innovation**

*Business R&D expenditure, total and information industries, as a percentage of GDP, 2016*



Note: See Statlink for figure notes.

Source: See StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888933915126>.

### Unleashing innovation: What matters most for policy?

- Boost entrepreneurship by reducing regulatory burdens for start-ups and facilitating access to finance for new and young firms through a mix of venture capital, debt and equity financing, and digital financing solutions such as platform-based lending.
- Re-evaluate regulations that may not be fit for the digital age, such as those that require a physical presence or minimum scale, or seek to address information asymmetries.
- Incentivise investment in basic R&D and intangible assets, including skills, organisational capital, data, software and patents, such as through R&D tax credits and intellectual property systems that are well-suited to the digital age.
- Foster knowledge diffusion through open innovation and open science initiatives, and promote open government data, for example through “open by default” policies, to stimulate innovation across the economy.
- Encourage policy experimentation and new business models across sectors, including through agile regulation and flexible application or enforcement of regulation (e.g. regulatory “sandboxes”), while protecting consumers.